

Yitro 5777

Spencer Cowan

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So Prime Minister: Why is the NHS in such a terrible state. So it's because of the mismanagement by Tony Blair and his labour government.

So. Have you noticed that there is a tendency on television to start a question or the reply with the word "So"?

So, it was something of a coincidence. It was on Wednesday and the front doorbell rang. It was a coincidence because I was just reading through the Torah piece that I have just read. My wife yelled up to me that she was in the middle of building the extension to the house and had an RSJ (rolled steel joist) in one hand and a bolt hammer in the other so would I please get the door. I galloped downstairs, practically doing a somersault. When I opened the door there were two gentlemen, one of whom said "How do you feel about the condition the world is in? And don't you think we can find all the answers in the Bible?" I said: I presume that you're Jehovah's Witnesses. You happen to have caught me on a good day, because it so happens I was just reading the Bible. I was reading Exodus chapter 19 about Jethro and no doubt you know whose father in law he was. To his credit, Quick as a flash he came back with: yes the father in law of Moses. But he had another name.

I said: You probably know that Jethro or Yitro in the Hebrew, means His Excellence, so may have been an Honorific title. Jethro was also known as REUEL.

It was a bit like a game of chess. He opened with the Giuoco Piano. I countered with Philidor's Defence. He went into the Two Knights Variation. I performed a Bishop fianchetto on the Queen side to control the long diagonal...although not normally recommended in this opening.

And on the principle that Jews answer a question with a question, I said: Then presumably you know the name of Jethro's daughter who was married to Moses. He hesitated and said: er well um. I thought: I've got you there matey. And

said “it was Zipporah, from the Hebrew Zippor, meaning: a bird” she was Moses wife”. Check mate, matey, I thought. I said: I’m actually Jewish, which reminded me of Sir Jonathan Miller’s well known quote: “I’m not really a Jew. Just Jewish. Not the whole hog, you know.”

I said: I’m actually Jewish and I don’t subscribe to the Christian doctrines. In fact we read one section of the Bible every week in synagogue, so we are fairly familiar with it, and no doubt you’ve heard us called the people of the book. Anyway, we chatted for a bit and agreed to differ but shook hands and parted politely.

That reminded me of the time when my father was confronted at the door by Jehovah’s Witnesses. He was a regular shul goer and that week the sidrah was “Noach”, That is Noah, the second book of the Bible.

He said to them: “as Bible readers, no doubt you know the dimensions of Noah’s Ark as described in Genesis Chapter 6 v 15. They hadn’t a clue, so he told them that it was: 300 cubits long, 50 cubits wide and 30 cubits high, a cubit being about 18”, so the ark’s tonnage was over 40,000 tons in today’s money, or as large as a good sized modern passenger ship, quite large for nowadays, but must have seemed enormous in biblical time, if in fact it ever existed.

I’m always amused by the passage in Genesis Chapter 9 v 20 & 21. Noah planted a vineyard and he drank the wine he had made, overdid it and became drunk as a skunk.

In today’s sidrah, not the section I read, there is in Chapter 20 of Exodus, the Ten Commandments. You will recall that the fourth commandment says, roughly: Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy, Six days shall you labour, but the seventh day shall be the Sabbath and you shall do no work, not you, your son, daughter, manservant, maidservant, ox, ass, cattle, nor the stranger that is in your midst. There’s one person missing, who is that? = your wife, so is it OK for your wife to work?

This single commandment has opened a whole can of worms, as to “what is work”

In the Jewish Chronicle on 22nd December last year:

An article on the front page of that issue of the JC could not have come a moment too soon.

'Is your oven Shabbat compliant?'

The Federation of Synagogues has produced an on-line guide. Are your oven and fridge shabbos compliant?

What a relief it must be to foresee the end of all those sleepless nights.

Let me explain:

Scripture does not give a list of labours forbidden on the Sabbath, but it incidentally mentions: field labour, buying and selling, travelling, cooking etc, as forbidden work. The Mishnah, part of the Talmud, however enumerates under 39 different headings all such acts that under Jewish Law are defined as work and therefore not to be performed on the Sabbath Day, for example ploughing, reaping and kindling a fire etc. I hope you haven't done any ploughing or reaping today!

It is this last one that has led to the problem that the Federation of Synagogues has tried to assist with. The prohibition to kindle a fire has come to mean don't turn on a light or use electricity. When you open your fridge door, what happens, a light comes on. Similarly with modern ovens, so the FedEx guide gives all sorts of methods for taping up the contacts, so that the light or the fan does not come on, but with modern lights many have magnetic switches, so the advice is to place a magnet strategically, so the magnetic switch fails to turn the light on. Could you be bothered?

So if you think you've got problems as a Liberal Jew, just spare a thought for those members of the Federation, who have to buy Kosher fridges and ovens.

Two weeks ago the choir accompanied our sage: Rabbi Dr Andrew Goldstein and went to the small community in Leicester to take part in the service. About this time last year a young rabbinical student from Leo Baeck College was invited to take services for a few weeks. On his very first Shabbat, a hot debate erupted as to whether one should or should not stand during the reading of the Ten Commandments.

The next day, the student rabbi visited the oldest member of the community 98 year-old Izzy Katz in the nursing home. "Mr. Katz, as the oldest member of the community," said the rabbinical student, "what is our synagogue's custom during the reading of the Ten Commandments?"

"Why do you ask?" asked Mr. Katz.

"Yesterday we read the Ten Commandments. Some people stood, some people sat. The ones standing started screaming at the ones sitting, telling them to stand up. The ones sitting started screaming at the ones standing, telling them to sit down....."

"That," said the old man, "is our custom."

And I shall conclude as always with a good old fashioned Ashkenazi Roumanian "Omeyn".