

## **“We Cannot Do It Alone”**

**Rabbi Jaclyn Cohen**

**Friday, January 21, 2022 – Parashat Yitro**

Fourteen years ago this spring, I sat at the head of a grand, oval-shaped table on the third floor of the Los Angeles campus of Hebrew Union College ready to be interviewed for rabbinical school.

I can feel the late-March sunlight streaming in through the windows. I see the skyline of downtown LA off in the distance. I look around the table at those on my committee - future professors, a handful of lay leaders, local clergy ... if memory serves, Rabbi Rick Kellner was there, too.

Soon the man who would become a trusted mentor, titan of the Reform Movement and - for the Harry Potter fans among us - the real-life embodiment of Albus Dumbledore himself, Rabbi Richard Levy of blessed memory, spoke up:

*“Jaclyn,” he began with a gentle smile and that classic twinkle in his eye. “Tell us - how does your family feel about you becoming a rabbi?”*

I smiled broadly. An easy one! *“They feel great about it! They love it, they’re so proud of me. My family has always been supportive.”*

*“That’s lovely. Terrific,” he said. “Because you know, not everyone who comes to interview with us can say the same.”*

*“Really?”* I felt myself deflate a little. Had that been a trick question? Who wouldn’t be proud of a loved one becoming clergy?

*“Really,” he said. “But - I’m glad to hear your family feels the way they do. And they must be so proud of you.”*

The interview continued, a lovely & pleasant experience all-around, and a few weeks later I learned I’d been accepted. Life moved forward and I - thankfully - continue to feel the unbridled support of family & dear friends to this day.

I haven't thought about that part of my interview much over the years. Sure, it came up early on at HUC as I learned the obstacles many classmates faced in choosing to become rabbis & cantors. It resurfaced while dating in my mid-twenties when I discovered how the phrase "rabbinical student" could make another person visibly squirm over mediocre beer.

But it wasn't until this past Shabbat - when a man entered Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas with a gun ... and held four Jews hostage for nearly twelve hours - that I thought back on that moment with laser focus. I remember Richard's earnest words but hear them differently now: tinged with pain, the distinct ache of those who *love* a human being who is also clergy. Fathers and mothers and daughters and sons, husbands and wives and partners and children ... each one of them serving as *our* support system, each one of them responsible for holding us so that we can hold you.

*Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bah zeh* - all Israel is responsible for one another, the Talmud teaches. And how true that felt as prayers, hopes, fears, and ultimately, sweet relief ricocheted through Reform rabbis' social media channels over the course of the day.

On Sunday morning, my husband picked a fight. It was about something stupid, some minor annoyance, and as the situation escalated I realized the root of his ire.

*"Josh," I finally said. "Is this about yesterday? Is there something you need to say because ... you barely spoke to me all day. Are you ... worried about me?"*

He took a deep breath, looked me in the eye and replied, *"Jaclyn - I am always worried about you."*

He admitted ... that over Shabbat he'd mostly gone silent ... because he couldn't bring himself to articulate the fear pulsing through his veins: *what if that was my wife?*

*"I know you're safe," he said, noting the exemplary care of Centurion Security, the extraordinary efforts of Temple Isaiah to protect its clergy & staff, its congregants & children. "But as a rabbinic family, it's something we'll just never shake."*

Call me naive, but it felt like the first time in the twenty-five years since I started on this path ... that I fully considered Richard Levy's kind yet heartbreaking suggestion ... that there are those who might be less than thrilled about their loved one's choice to become clergy. (pause)

Don't get me wrong; I love what I do and where I do it; if anything, this week also affirmed for me how fortunate I am to be a rabbi on this clergy team, to touch people's lives, to deliver fierce words of Torah on a Friday night. It's a privilege, and an honor, and no hostage taker can ever dim my pride.

But - it is no secret that the last decade has brought out a different level of anxiety in the Jewish community, as an anti-Semitism once thought to lurk just below the surface now bursts forth in frightening and public ways. Whether it's swastikas carved into school desks, anti-Jewish slurs dropped into casual conversation, vandalism of Jewish property ... or acts of violence committed against Jews ... our security has not felt this precarious for decades.

As The New York Times shared in a piece published Monday, "more and more, the Jewish community has accepted ... [that] what it means to be a Jew in the United States in 2022 is that your institution needs to have guards, checkpoints and security."

As rabbis & cantors, as public-facing Jews, we knew to a certain extent what we were signing up for. For better or worse, I knew safety and security (and, for that matter, antisemitism) would always be part of my job.

But what about our families, our loved ones? Those who see the "real" us at the end of a grueling day, who've created homes and human beings with us, who are absolutely a part of our clergy identity ... yet who did not necessarily sign up for all this on their own?

What about Adena Cytron-Walker, who - while the majority of the Jewish world sat glued to social media on Saturday, stomachs churning, hearts racing, hitting "refresh" on news apps over and over - most likely spent the day wondering if she would ever see her husband alive again?

For that matter, what about the greater Congregation Beth Israel family ... who likely spent their Shabbat wondering ... if they would ever see their rabbi and fellow congregants (their *shul* family) alive again ... or if they would ever be able to enter their *Beit Knesset*, their sacred house of prayer again?

*Kol mishpacha Yisrael arevim zeh bah zeh ...* the “family of Israel” is responsible for one another. And tonight, one week post Colleyville, I know our “family of Israel” feels a collective sense of extraordinary vulnerability.

This week’s Torah portion, *Yitro*, affords us a glimpse of a sort of “rabbinic family” before there was such a thing as rabbis. Yitro is Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law. The Israelites have recently left Egypt and entered the wilderness; they are about to receive the Ten Commandments later in this *parsha*.

What I love about Jethro - what I have always loved about him - is how big of an impact he makes on Moses in such a short window of text. I love that Jethro is a priest of Midian, a non-Israelite, who chooses to join up with Moses and these recently-freed slaves immediately post-Exodus. And he jumps right in, showing allegiance to Adonai through sacrifices & burnt offerings. Without hesitation, Jethro generously casts his lot with the people of Israel.

Mensch.

But Jethro’s most significant act ... is helping shape Moses’ inchoate (*in-KO-it*) leadership style. Immediately after coming on the scene, Jethro observes his son-in-law attempting to serve the entire community on his own. That’s like a modern-day solo pulpit on major steroids. Moses, God’s trusted partner, takes everything upon himself: every dispute, every need, every squabble and complaint.

Jethro witnesses it and says to him:

*“Lo tov ha’davar asher atah oseh - 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.”*  
(Exodus 18:17-18)

Sure enough, Moses listens. And shortly after their exchange, he establishes a tribunal - a collective effort of multiple minds to govern the people as they continue their journey toward the Promised Land.

I have always loved Jethro's words. Always. It is a simple yet powerful teaching, a reminder that building a community is never, and can never, be a solitary act. Jethro offers Moses a clarion call of purpose. As one member of Moses' family, he serves as the compass that points the People of Israel *forward*, through the wilderness ... to their future.

Whether we are solo practitioners or members of a professional team, we know that building and sustaining a community of Jews is a task too heavy for one person alone.

We know the task of LOUDLY and VOCIFEROUSLY calling out and combating anti-semitism is too heavy to do alone.

We know the task of keeping our communities safe every single day is too heavy to do alone.

And we know the task of securing a Jewish future that is joyful & sacred, bold & beautiful, modern, traditional and sustainable ... is too heavy to do alone.

We need partners. We need allies. We need one another.

We need our families, and they need us. We need the Jethros and Joshua Cohens, the Adena Cytron-Walkers. We need the Pastor J. Edgar Boyds and the collective of non-Jewish clergy leaders in Colleyville who showed up last Saturday to lend support to their brothers & sisters of Beth Israel.

We need our country's leadership - our American family - to continue to call out and fight against hate - and we need United States senators to swiftly confirm Dr. Deborah Lipstadt as U.S. Ambassador for Global Antisemitism.

We need one another. Because we cannot do it alone.

*"Kol ha'olam arevim zeh ba zeh"* - the whole world is responsible for one another. Even when we disagree, even when we're frustrated and angry with each other. Even if we don't see eye-to-eye. Every single one of us, created in God's image, deserves to live in freedom and safety, and we must

continue to work every single day to root out hate and terror whenever and wherever they present themselves.

We need one another. Because we cannot do it alone.

In homes and synagogues around the world tonight, we lit the Shabbat candles as we do every Friday, sharing the light of our tradition with the world. One Jewish family, complicated, diverse and dynamic, shining bright for all to see.

From the legacy of our ancestors to the promise of future generations, our collective Jewish family's light will not be dimmed.

Am Yisrael Chai - the people of Israel lives.

Shabbat Shalom.