

PARSHAT YITRO - shiur #2

YITRO - the 'father-in-law' or 'brother-in-law'

Many of us are so familiar with Rashi's commentary on the first pasuk of the Parsha that Yitro had seven names (see 18:1) - that we don't even consider any other possibility. However, the classical commentators offer several other very interesting interpretations.

What difference does it make, you may ask?

If only to fulfill the mitzvah of "la'asok b'divrei Torah" - would surely be reason enough. In the following shiur, we attempt to explain the underlying reasons for this controversy, and hopefully will also gain a deeper understanding of why the Torah dedicates so many details to this topic.

INTRODUCTION

To our surprise, the first time that we meet Moshe Rabeinu's 'father-in-law' in Chumash - his name is most definitely Reuel:

"...Moshe fled from the face of Pharaoh, and dwelt in the land of Midian; and he sat down by a well...

Now the priest of Midian - KOHEN MIDYAN - had seven daughters; and they came and drew water... and the shepherds came and drove them away; but Moshe stood up and helped them...

When they came to **Reuel their father**, he said: 'How is it that you have come so soon to-day...

And he said unto his daughters: 'And where is he... and he [Reuel] gave Moshe - **Zipporah his daughter**.

[See Shmot 2:15-22, note however that the Hebrew word "choten" does not appear in this entire section!]

Clearly, if we follow the simple meaning of the word "avihem" [their father] in Hebrew, then Reuel is definitely Moshe's father in law! However, only a few psukim later, we find that Moshe is tending Yitro's sheep:

"Moshe was keeping the flock of Yitro - CHOTNO [his father-in-law?], KOHEN MIDYAN - the priest of Midian ; and he led the flock to the farthest end of the wilderness, and came to the mountain of God, unto Horeb." (see 3:1)

Everyone's immediate impression is that Yitro must be the same person as Reuel, since he is called KOHEN MIDYAN - as was Reuel in 2:16, and he is referred to now as "choten Moshe" - which almost everyone translates as 'father-in-law' (see any English translation). So why the 'name-change' from Reuel to Yitro?

HOW MANY YEARS HAVE PASSED?

Even though only several psukim separate between these two stories in Shmot 2:16-22 and 3:1, it could be that many decades have passed in the interim. Let's explain why.

When Moshe first fled from Egypt (see 2:11-15), the impression is that he was rather young. Hence, when he first meets Zipporah, it could be that was only in his twenties (or thirties). However, in chapter three - when God appears to Moshe at the burning bush, he is definitely 80 years old (see Shmot 7:7)

[Our assumption is that Moshe went back to Egypt immediately after God appeared to him at the burning bush, and shortly after went to Pharaoh and performed the miracles etc.]

If indeed several decades have passed since Moshe first married Zipporah, then it could be that her father Reuel - the previous KOHEN MIDYAN - had passed away - and in the meantime, Reuel's son - Yitro - had become the new KOHEN MIDYAN. If so, then we would have to interpret "choten Moshe" in 3:1 - as Moshe's brother in law.

CHOVAV - A PRIEST or TOUR GUIDE?

To verify if this interpretation is possible, it would logical to check other times In Chumash where the word "choten" is used. Indeed we find this word used numerous times in regard to Yitro (in Shmot chapter 18), but to our surprise, it is used only one other time in Chumash - in describing Chovav ben Reuel in Sefer Bamidbar. Let's take a look:

"And Moshe said unto **Chovav, the son of Reuel** the Midianite, CHOTEN MOSHE - 'We are journeying unto the place of which the LORD said: I will give it you; come with us, and we will do you good...' (see Bamidbar 10:29-30)

[note that the phrase "choten Moshe" must refer to Chovav and not Reuel, based on Sefer Shoftim 4:11!]

If we follow the simple meaning of the text, that Chovav is NOT Yitro - then we find additional proof that "choten" implies 'brother in law'. In other words, Zipporah had at least two brothers, Yitro and Chovav - and they were all children of Reuel. When Reuel died, Yitro took over as KOHEN MIDYAN, while Chovav seems to have become a 'professional scout' - who joined Bnei Yisrael in the desert to help them with their travels (see again Bamidbar 10:29-33).

Furthermore, note how Chovav is not referred to as KOHEN MIDYAN, rather only as "choten Moshe". It also appears that Chovav accepted Moshe Rabeinu's offer to join their journey and receive a portion in the land, as supported by Sefer Shoftim 4:11 (read carefully). On the one hand, Yitro himself returned to Midyan after his short visit, as described in Parshat Yitro (to bring back his 'sister' Zipporah), as verified by Shmot 18:26. After all, he was the KOHEN of MIDYAN - and hence he needed to return to fulfill his duties in his own country.

[Note that even though Shmot 2:16 states that Reuel had seven daughters, this does not preclude the possibility that he also had sons. The pasuk mentions only the daughters, as they were tending to the sheep, and they were the 'pool' from whom Moshe would receive his wife from Reuel, their father.]

PILEGESH B'GIVAH

In Tanach, we do find one additional use of the word "choten", and finally in regard to someone other than Moshe Rabeinu. In the story of the Levite who travels to Bet-lechem to bring back his "pilegish" [concubine], the father of this "pilegish" is referred to three times as "chotno avi ha'naara" (see Shoftim 19:4-9).

How should we translate this phrase?

At first glance, this seems to be a perfect proof that "choten" implies a father in law. In fact, this pasuk could almost serve as the definition of this word - to mean specifically a father in law. If so, then in Chumash, it must also imply father in law - and hence Yitro and Chovav must be the same person, as well as Reuel (unless we explain that Reuel was the grandfather / see Rashi Shmot 18:1) - and hence the conclusion that we are all familiar with, quoted by Rashi on 18:1.

However, this phrase could prove exactly the opposite. If the word "choten" implies 'father-in-law' - and only 'father-in-law' - then why the redundancy? Would not the word "chotno" be enough, without the additional phrase "avi ha'naara"!

On the other hand, if "chotno" implies any relationship through marriage, be it 'brother in law', or 'father in law'; then the extra phrase is informative, as it tells us that he was specifically her father, and not her brother.

[Why that chapter in Sefer Shoftim emphasizes this point of "chotno" is beyond the scope of this shiur, but can be explained when considering the numerous ironies in that entire event.]

THE VERB L"HITCHATEN

To appreciate why the word "choten" could imply any relationship through marriage, let's note a pasuk from Sefer Melachim:

"VA'YITCHATEN Shlomo et PHARAOH - King of Egypt, and he took the daughter of Pharaoh..." (see I Kings 3:1)

Note, that Shlomo 'marries' Pharaoh ["va'yitchaten"], and then takes his daughter as a wife. In other words, the verb "hitchaten" can imply entering into a family relationship. [As we all know, you don't only marry the wife - you marry her entire family!]

If so, then "choten" could imply 'brother in law', just as it could also imply 'father in law'.

See Ibn Ezra on Bamdibar 10:29, where he states this explicitly. Note also his commentary on Shmot 3:1, where he claims that Yitro is Zipporah's brother (as we did). [However, he concludes that Chovav and Yitro are the same person. In our shiur, we entertained the possibility that they are different brothers.]

If you've followed the shiur, it would seem that if "choten Moshe" could imply 'brother in law', then it could be that Yitro, Chovav, and Reuel, are all different people!

[I haven't researched this topic as much as I would have liked, so if you are familiar with any other sources, that would either support or contradict these conclusions, please let me know.]

On the other hand, if "choten" in Hebrew implies only a 'father in law', then we are forced to conclude that Chovav and Yitro are the same person, while Reuel is yet another name for Yitro; or alternatively, the grandfather of Zipporah, which would force us to conclude that Hebrew word "aviha" could imply grandfather as well as father.

[Turns out that we must widen our definition of either the Hebrew word "av" or "choten"!]

If so, we must ask ourselves - what is the meaning of these various names for the same person? See Ramban on 2:16 for a beautiful explanation, as well as Rashi on 3:1. On the other hand, if they are different people, we must also search for meaning.

HAR SINAI & YITRO

In either case, we must also ponder why the Torah dedicates so many details to Yitro (and his family).

Before discussing this question, let's discuss another controversy between the commentators concerning when Yitro first came to meet Moshe at Har Sinai.

Recall how Parshat Yitro opens with Yitro's arrival at the campsite of Bnei Yisrael at Har Sinai (see 18:5). The location of this 'parshia' in Sefer Shmot clearly suggests that Yitro arrives **before** Matan Torah, yet certain details found later in the 'parshia', (e.g. Moshe's daily routine of judging the people and teaching them God's laws/ see 18:15-17), suggests that this event may have taken place **after** Matan Torah. After all, what 'laws of God' was Moshe teaching if the Torah had not yet been given? Furthermore, it seems (from chapter 19) that as soon as Bnei Yisrael arrived at Har Sinai - that Moshe went up to God immediately, and the events of Maamad Har Sinai began (see 19:1-8); thus not leaving any time for the story in chapter 18 to transpire.

Based on this and several other strong proofs, Ibn Ezra claims that this entire parshia took place **after** Matan Torah ('ein mukdam u-me'uchar'). Ramban argues that since none of those proofs are conclusive, this entire 'parshia' (i.e. Shmot chapter 18) should be understood as taking place **BEFORE** Matan Torah (i.e. when it is written - 'yesh mukdam u-me'uchar..').

Rashi (see 18:13) offers an interesting 'compromise' by 'splitting' the parshia in half! His opinion would agree with Ramban that Yitro first arrives **before** Matan Torah (18:1-12); however, the details found later (in 18:13-27), e.g. how Moshe taught the people God's laws etc. took place at a much later time. This interpretation forces Rashi to explain that the word 'mi-macharat' in 18:13 does not mean the 'next day', but rather the day after Yom Kippur (when Moshe came down from Har Sinai with the second Luchot), even though it was several months later.

But even Ibn Ezra, who maintains that the entire 'parshia' takes place after Matan Torah, must explain **why** the Torah records this 'parshia' here instead. Therefore, Ibn Ezra suggests a thematic explanation - based on the juxtaposition of this 'parshia' and the story of Amalek:

"...And now I will explain to you why this parshia is written here [out of place]: Because the preceding parshia discussed the terrible deeds of Amalek against Israel, now in contrast the Torah tells us of the **good** deeds that Yitro did for Am Yisrael..." [see Ibn Ezra 18:1]

Ibn Ezra claims that the Torah wants to teach us that not all 'goyim' are bad. Certainly, we encounter enemies such as Amalek, but we may also encounter righteous non-jews, such as Yitro - from whom we can gain important advice.

YITRO'S FAMILY - Before & After

To conclude our shiur, we follow the 'lead' of Ibn Ezra, by noting how we find Yitro's family mentioned at key points in Jewish history.

First, Moshe grows up in Pharaoh's house; yet afterward, spends a significant amount of time in Midyan, living with Reuel and Yitro, the family of KOHEN MIDYAN. It's not clear precisely what God Yitro believed in, nonetheless - he definitely comes to recognize the God of Israel after these events, and it would only be logical to assume that Moshe acquired some of his leadership traits during his stay in Midyan.

Just as we later find a contrast between Amalek Yitro, we find an earlier contrast between growing up in Pharaoh's home vs. Yitro's home.

However, more significant is the fact that the Torah 'surrounds' Bnei Yisrael's encampment at Har Sinai with two stories considering Yitro (and Chovav).

Immediately upon our arrival at Sinai, and right before the story of Matan Torah, the Torah records the story of Yitro's important advice to Moshe concerning how establish an organized court system. Then, in Sefer Bamdibar, immediately before Bnei Yisrael leave Har Sinai, as they embark on their journey to the land of Israel - we find Moshe Rabeinu's offer that Chovav join the people on their journey, to provide assistance.

On the one hand, Matan Torah was a singular event, intended only for the people of Israel - to enter a special covenant - and receive God's special laws that will make them His nation. However, the deeper purpose of that covenant (and those laws) was for Bnei Yisrael to become God's 'model nation' that would help bring the Name of God to all mankind - should we keep His laws in the proper manner.

For that reason, it may be quite significant that this key event in our national history is surrounded by events that relate to our relationship with the outside world. While there are times when we find ourselves isolated from the outside world, we must always remember that we were chosen to have a positive impact upon it. There may also be times that we can improve ourselves by taking wise advice from other nations (Yitro before Matan Torah), and there may also be times when they can even provide us with guidance should we become a bit 'lost in a desert' (Chovav after Matan Torah). However, foremost, we must be dedicated to keeping the special laws that God gave us at Matan Torah - so that our symbiotic relationship with other nations can remain fruitful - for the betterment of all mankind.

shabbat shalom,
menachem