

Parashat BEHA'ALOTEKHA

Moshe and Chovav

By Rav Yonatan Grossman

Between the description of the tribes' order for their journey from Mount Sinai (10:11-28) and the description of the start of the actual journey (10:33-34), we find a brief and puzzling section: Moshe's proposal to Chovav, son of Re'uel the Midianite, that he join them in their trek to Canaan. (In this article, I am assuming that Chovav is Yitro.[1]) This section is startling for two reasons.

a. The conclusion of the discussion between Moshe and his father-in-law is not recorded in the text. At first, Chovav refuses to join the nation ("I shall not go; rather, I shall go to my land and to my birthplace"), and so Moshe launches a new campaign to persuade him. The Torah omits his response, and it is difficult to know what Chovav eventually decided to do. On the one hand, the fact that his reply is not recorded would seem to prove that he stood fast in his refusal (as Abravanel and Seforno conclude). On the other hand, silence often indicates acquiescence, and the Torah's subsequent narrative – "And they traveled from God's mountain..." – gives the impression that Chovav was persuaded, and that he was among those who "traveled from God's mountain" (as the Ramban concludes).

Whichever way we understand the conclusion of the discussion, we must question why the Torah omits Chovav's final answer. This, after all, is the crux of what this section is about! The Torah uses words sparingly, but how can it suddenly be so frugal just as we reach the whole point of the story?

b. Aside from Chovav's decision, we must question the need for the inclusion of this dialogue between him and Moshe. Of what significance is it to us whether Chovav joins Am Yisrael in their journey or refuses to do so? How does this discussion contribute to the general description of Israel's journey towards Canaan?

In order to clarify this parasha, let us first note its close connection with the adjacent sections. This bond is especially clear in the opening: "And Moshe said to Chovav son of Re'uel the Midianite, father-in-law of Moshe: WE ARE JOURNEYING..." (10:29). The verb with which this discussion opens – "journeying" (nos'im) – is interwoven in all the sections that appear in the relevant context (and usually as the heading with which the unit begins):

1. Description of the cloud leading the nation: "By God's word Bnei Yisrael WOULD JOURNEY (yis'u)" (9:18);

2. Fashioning of the trumpets: "Make for yourself two silver trumpets... and FOR THE JOURNEYING (le-masa') of the camps" (10:2);
3. Description of the order of the journey: "And Bnei Yisrael SET OFF/JOURNEYED (yis'u) on their JOURNEYS (mas'eihem) in the wilderness of Sinai" (10:12);
4. Moshe's proposal to Chovav: "We are JOURNEYING (nos'im) to the place" (10:29);
5. Beginning of the journey: "They JOURNEYED (yis'u) from God's mountain, for three days" (10:33);
6. The "parenthetical" song of the Ark: "And it was, when the ark JOURNEYED (bi-neso'a), that Moshe would say" (10:35).

It should be noted that, aside from the above excerpts, each of which serves to introduce a brief literary unit, this verb appears in the course of our section no less than 28 times![2] This is less surprising if we bear in mind that all of these sections deal with the preparations for leaving the lengthy encampment at the foot of Mount Sinai and setting off on the desert journey; hence, the verb "n-s-" (journeying) is quite appropriate as a refrain.

In any event, it is clear that Moshe's proposal to Chovav sits well and comfortably within the broader context of the parashot that we are discussing – if for no other reason than that here, too, the key verb appears in Moshe's introduction to the discussion.

However, this fact merely serves to highlight the problem that we raised: why is Moshe's proposal to his father-in-law so important that it rates an appearance within the broader context of Bnei Yisrael's preparations for their desert journeying? Of what consequence is it to us whether Chovav joins them or not?

Before addressing the substance of this discussion, let us note the symmetry created by Moshe's invitation. Prior to Am Yisrael's arrival at Mount Sinai, the text describes their encounter with two different models of gentile nations. First they are attacked by Amalek (Shemot 17), and immediately thereafter we hear of the arrival of Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, who expresses great admiration at the miracles that God has performed for His nation (Shemot 18).[3] Now, as Bnei Yisrael leave Mount Sinai, the Torah once again presents these two models. First we read of Moshe's invitation to his father-in-law to join them on their journey. Immediately thereafter we hear, in the "song of the Ark" that Moshe utters when the camp is ready to move, about Israel's enemies – who are actually the enemies of God: "Arise, O God; may Your enemies be scattered and may those who hate You flee from before You."

Thus the Torah creates an inverse structure in presenting Israel's relations with the other nations:

Amalek – Yitro – MOUNT SINAI – Chovav – God's enemies

Adjacent to the description of the covenant that God creates with Israel, we discover the attitude of this covenant towards those who are not included in it. If the gentile is an "enemy of God" who comes to wage war against His nation, he has no future. But if the gentile feels and expresses himself like Yitro – "The Lord is greater than all the gods" (Shemot 18:11) – then he is joyfully invited to join Israel and share their journey. (This subject requires further discussion, but the scope of this shiur does not allow for it here.)

Let us now clarify the significance of the section under discussion by examining more closely the dialogue between Moshe and Chovav.

At first Moshe suggests that Chovav join Am Yisrael in their journey towards Canaan (10:29):

"Moshe said to Chovav, son of Re'uel the Midianite, Moshe's father-in-law: We are journeying to the place concerning which God said, 'I shall give it to you.' Go then, with us, and we shall be good to you, for God has promised good for Israel."

Right at the start of Moshe's speech, we detect the tension that is destined to erupt. Chovav is identified by two consecutive titles: "the Midianite," and "Moshe's father-in-law." These two titles reflect two identities. On the one hand, he is a "Midianite" – such that we may reasonably expect him to want to return to Midian. On the other hand, he is "Moshe's father-in-law" – and therefore may quite possibly choose to join his son-in-law and daughter in their desert journey.[4]

Moshe's actual words begin with a reminder of God's promise to His people ("the place concerning which God said"), and also conclude with it ("for God has promised good for Israel"). It should be emphasized that most of Moshe's speech is included within this framework, while the actual invitation ("Go, then, with us, and we shall be good to you") is formulated very briefly. It would not be unreasonable to posit that the crux of this section actually concerns an emphasis of Moshe's great faith in the success of the journey, for this is patently what is being highlighted here.

In any event, this framework demonstrates that Moshe is not merely extending a regular family offer of a son-in-law to his father-in-law to join him on his journey. The religious significance of the journey is clear and is emphasized in Moshe's message, and it is in this context that we must view what he says. We shall return to this matter further on.

As mentioned, Moshe's request is formulated in just four words (in the Hebrew): the actual invitation, "Go with us," and the promise, "and we shall be good to you." This brief utterance is both lyrical and ceremonious, as a result of the repetition of consonant sounds in the request and the promise:

"Lekha (go)

itanu (with us)

ve-hetavnu (and we shall be good)

lakh (to you)."

This combination of sounds emphasizes the attractiveness of the proposal for Chovav: tris formulated in a similar way to the journeying, such that it is bound up with it. Thus, Moshe's emphasis here is on what Chovav stands to gain from joining them.

What "good" is Moshe referring to? It is difficult to answer this question with certainty. The content of the "good" remains opaque, and there are various possible explanations.

Actually, Moshe's words can barely be regarded as a request, in the usual sense of the term. It seems more like a proposal. Moshe emphasizes its attractiveness to his father-in-law, but he does not plead with him, and there is certainly no hint in his words that Bnei Yisrael need his presence.

Chovav's refusal is conveyed quite firmly and decisively:

"He said to him: I shall not go; rather, to my land and to my birthplace I shall go."
(30)

Chovav's answer consists of two sentences, each concluding with the verb "elekh." In the first phrase, the verb appears in the negative ("lo elekh"), while in the second Chovav indicates where he will go instead. This formulation conveys a sense of decisiveness. At the same time, we note a lack of symmetry between the two phrases, perhaps reflecting politeness on Chovav's part. In the second phrase, before the verb "elekh" appears, he notes his destination (to his land and to his birthplace). In contrast, in the first – negative – phrase, Chovav expresses only a negation of the verb, but makes no mention of the name of the destination or of the other journeyers. (He could, for instance, have said, "I shall not go with you.") This omission stands out not only because of the two parallel phrases, but also because the verb "to go" had appeared in Moshe's proposal along with the direction of movement ("We are journeying to the place concerning which God said, I shall give it to you. GO, THEN, WITH US"). Since Chovav uses the verb that was previously used by Moshe, we would expect him, too, to indicate the direction of movement ("with you") – which, as mentioned, he fails to do.

It seems that this omission should be interpreted in Chovav's favor. The statement that we would have expected – "I shall not go with you" – sounds personal and insulting. By failing to state that he does not wish to journey "with the nation," it sounds as though Chovav is rejecting the prospect of a journey, but is not rejecting the nation with which he has been offered to journey.

The favorable image of Chovav that arises from this discussion with Moshe is highlighted by his allusion to the words of Avraham. The phrase, "To my land and to my birthplace I shall go" appears only in one other place: when Avraham sends his servant to find a wife for Yitzchak. He tells him, "...But to my land and to my birthplace you shall go, and you shall take a wife for my son, for Yitzchak" (Bereishit 24:4).[5]

The reader associates Avraham's dispatch of the servant to find a wife for Yitzchak as arising from his opposition to intermingle with the dwellers of the land. This wish on Avraham's part was certainly justified, and it is certainly to be interpreted in his favor. Chovav's answer, formulated in a parallel fashion, hints that he wants his wish not to intermingle with the "dwellers of the land" (Am Yisrael) to be judged in a similarly positive light.

Despite Chovav's decisiveness, Moshe is not convinced, and he again tries to persuade him to join Am Yisrael on their journey. At first glance, it would appear that Moshe is repeating himself, but there are in fact two important differences between his first attempt and his second (31-32):

"Please, do not leave us, for you have come to know our encampment in the desert, and you have become our eyes. And it will be, if you go with us, that the GOOD (tov) that God will bestow (yetiv) upon us, we shall also bestow (hetavnu) upon you."

Moshe's opening words already introduce a new atmosphere: "Please do not leave us." Now it becomes apparent that this is no neutral proposition, but rather an entreaty. Moreover, it is no longer Chovav who stands at the center of the invitation, but rather the nation ("do not leave US"). This becomes even more obvious in Moshe's depiction of Chovav as Israel's "eyes" in the desert, such that it suddenly becomes clear that the nation NEEDS Chovav to join them on their journey.

In fact, this gives away the reason for Moshe attaching such importance to the matter. The image of "eyes" is apparently related to Chovav's knowledge and experience of the desert: he knows which way is best to walk and when, how to erect tents, how to find sources of water, what to eat, etc.[6] This is a complex matter, especially for a whole nation including young children, flocks of livestock, and property. The nation needs guidance concerning both the natural hardships of the desert (the heat, finding water, etc.) and the human dangers: the robbers waiting to pounce on any traveler who is weary and no longer alert, ready to take his life and plunder his possessions.

The heavy responsibility that Moshe feels resting upon his shoulders leads him to repeat his request that Chovav join them on their travels. As we know (assuming that Chovav is indeed Yitro), the previous suggestions raised by Moshe's father-in-law concerning judicial procedures were in fact adopted by the nation, and it would be reasonable for Moshe to assume that his knowledge could also be useful during the journey through the open and threatening desert.

Beyond adding that the nation, not just Moshe, needs Chovav to remain, there is another change in Moshe's second attempt at persuasion, related to the good that Chovav can expect in recompense. Moshe no longer speaks of an abstract "good" whose significance is difficult to measure, but rather describes Chovav's full participation in the good that God will bestow upon the nation. It seems that Moshe is inviting Chovav to take part in inheriting the land together with Israel – for this is the "good" to which he referred originally.[7]

Moshe's desire to persuade his father-in-law is also apparent in the intensive use of the word "good" and its derivatives. His first invitation already contained the word twice; now he mentions this root three times in quick succession.

As mentioned at the outset, we would expect to find Chovav's answer recorded in the Torah, but there is no mention of it. Instead of his response, we read about the beginning of the journey:

"They journeyed from God's mountain, a distance of three days, and the Ark of God's Covenant journeyed before them in this three-day journey, to seek out for them a resting place." (verse 33)

How are we to understand the Torah's silence when it comes to the most important part of this story: did Chovav eventually join them, or did he return to his land? We are forced to concede that this is apparently not the crux of the story. The Torah's intention in recording the conversation between Moshe and Chovav is not to tell us whether Chovav joined them on their journey, but rather focuses upon Moshe's words to him. The point of this section lies in the very attempt to persuade him, rather than in the historical question of what decision he made.[8]

In this context, I believe, the Torah portrays Moshe's father-in-law in a positive light. Chovav presents a position that the Torah views favorably, specifically because there is an undercurrent of criticism of the other side – i.e., of Moshe. Obviously, the Torah does not mean here to criticize his deeds or his manner of leadership, but rather hints at a criticism on the educational level. Through Moshe's words, and specifically through their negation, a message is conveyed concerning God's leadership of His nation in the desert.

We mentioned previously that, following Moshe's invitation, we are "disappointed" by the omission of Chovav's response. In fact, there is a reaction in principle to Moshe's words which, even if not uttered explicitly by Chovav, is nevertheless related as part of the Torah's narrative. In other words, we may see in the description of the journey that follows immediately after Moshe's invitation to Chovav, the Torah's reaction to Moshe's request – a reaction that negates his words altogether. While Moshe maintains that it is Chovav who will be the "eyes" of the nation, the text records: "And the Ark of God's Covenant journeyed before them, on the three-day journey, to seek out for them a resting place." Now it is clear who represents the eyes of Israel in the desert – the Ark of God's Covenant, which travels in front of the nation. While Moshe tells Chovav, "You have come to know OUR ENCAMPMENT (chanoteinu) in the desert," it suddenly becomes clear that it is actually the Ark that "seeks out for them a RESTING PLACE (menucha)."

Here we should make mention of the "chain of parashot" that we discussed above (those units containing the root "n-s-"). This chain has clear boundaries. In the beginning we are told that it is the cloud that leads Israel on their journey ("by the word of God they would journey"), and at the end, the text emphasizes once again: "And God's cloud was upon them by day when they journeyed from the encampment." Since the framework of these literary units emphasizes God's leadership of His people in the desert and the fact that He shows them the way, Moshe's words to Chovav deviate from this general message.

The irony of Moshe's invitation to Chovav arises from Moshe's own formulation of it. As mentioned, his first attempt emphasizes God's kindness to His nation, with more attention devoted to that than to the invitation itself. Thus we do actually detect the general message of this unit: God has promised good to His people, and it is He Who will lead them on the way!

Chovav's reaction is omitted from the text because, in a profound sense, it is not significant. It is not he who is destined to lead the nation on their long journeys through the desert, but rather God. The nation must internalize the message that it is not Chovav's eyes that they need, but rather, "God's eyes that wander throughout the earth" (Zekharia 4:10). It is not this mortal who will protect them on the way, but rather God's direct Providence: "God's cloud was upon them by day in their journey from the encampment" (10:34).

Notes:

[1] The Torah refers to "Chovav son of Re'uel, 'choten' of Moshe." There is some question as to Chovav's identity – his relationship with Yitro, identified in Sefer Shemot as Moshe's father-in-law, and with Re'uel, identified as Tziphora's father. Among the Rishonim, there are those (including Rashi) who identify Chovav with Yitro, and suggest that he had several names, while Re'uel was the grandfather of Yitro's daughters. Others propose that the term "choten" (generally translated as "father-in-law") in Tanakh does not necessarily refer specifically to the wife's father, but may refer to the wife's family in general. Thus Yitro, who is Chovav, may in fact have been Moshe's brother-in-law (Tziphora's brother), while Re'uel was Tziphora's father (Ibn Ezra).

[2] The very fact that this root appears so many times indicates that this is the central motif of these parashot. According to Cassuto's method of literary analysis, a key word must appear seven times or some number that is a multiple of seven. I personally find it difficult to accept this principle as a critical necessity; there are many examples of key words that are repeated several times but not a number that is a multiple of seven. An example is to be found in the same dialogue between Moshe and Chovav, in which there can be no doubt that the root "tov" (good) appears as a key word, but it is repeated only five times. In any event, in the parasha under discussion the root "n-s-" (journeying) does in fact appear 28 times, thus satisfying Cassuto's requirements.

[3] As Ibn Ezra notes, the connection between these two episodes (the war against Amalek and the arrival of Yitro) is also evident on the linguistic and literary level; clearly, the Torah wants the one to be read against the backdrop of the other. See, for example, Cassuto's commentary on Sefer Shemot (Jerusalem 5712), pp. 145-146 (Heb.).

[4] See Rav Y. Shaviv's article, "A Study of the Names of Yitro – Biblical Stylistics," Beit Mikra 35 (5750), esp. p. 89. Rav E. Samet points to a similar tension that arises upon Yitro's arrival at the Israelite camp, as described in Sefer Shemot. See his VBM shiur, archived on the VBM website.

[5] Attention should be paid to the fact that Avraham appears in this scene as a prospective father-in-law, sending his servant to find a wife for his son. Chovav is likewise "Moshe's father-in-law," speaking with his wife's husband.

[6] "You have become our eyes" – this is actually written in the future tense ("You will be our eyes"). Rashi explains: "Concerning any matter that is hidden from our eyes, you will enlighten us" (on 10:31); Ramban explains: "Through your knowledge of the desert, you will be for us like eyes, to conquer the lands, and you will direct us in the way we should go."

[7] This view has halakhic significance, as evidenced by the mitzva of bringing bikkurim (the offering of first fruits): "The children of Keini, father-in-law of Moshe, would bring (bikkurim) and also recite (the customary declaration), as it is written, 'And it will be, if you go with us...'" (Tosefta Bikkurim 1:2). See also Yerushalmi, which derives the same law from Moshe's first request: "The children of Keini, Moshe's father-in-law, bring and also recite, as it is written, 'Go with us and we shall be good to you'" (Bikkurim 1:4, folio 64). See also Ramban's commentary on this verse.

[8] In order not to leave the reader in suspense, we may note the comments by various Rishonim who indicate that, in light of the mention made of "the Keini," the children of Yitro, in Sefer Shoftim (1:16) and in Sefer Shemuel (I 15:6), it seems that Chovav was eventually convinced and did reach Canaan together with Bnei Yisrael, and even received an inheritance in the land.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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