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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT YITRO

**"And He Prostrated Himself, and He Kissed Him":
Ambiguity in the Encounter between Moshe and Yitro**

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Biblical commentators have wrestled with the question of when Yitro's visit to the Israelite camp in the wilderness actually took place. Some maintain that it was after the giving of the Torah, based on the principle that the Torah narrative does not necessarily follow chronological order. Others argue that the visit appears in its proper chronological place, prior to the giving of the Torah. The debate over this issue largely overlooks the question of why this episode is accorded such immense importance. The description of Yitro's visit and his advice to Moshe occupies a great many verses, located in between historical events that are pillars of Jewish consciousness: the war against Amalek, just prior to Yitro's appearance, and the giving of the Torah on Sinai, directly afterwards.¹

In this *shiur* we will focus on a particular literary technique that is utilized our *parasha*, among other biblical narratives. We will examine its characteristics in some sample textual units and then, on the basis of the elements that are common to our *parasha* and the other narratives in which it appears, attempt to explain its place, its importance, and its messages in the story of Yitro.

Biblical narrative follows its characters through specific episodes that the Torah sees fit to record. Within its concise description, the text must include all the information necessary for the reader to judge the characters in keeping with the messages of the text. Various textual techniques compensate for the economy of style that characterizes biblical narrative.² One of these is the tactic

¹ There is a midrashic explanation of the names of Yitro which views the name "Yeter" as alluding to the fact that he "added" (*yitter*), as it were, a *parasha* that was named after him (see *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishma'el*, Yitro 1). However, there is no explanation here for why this is so.

² Examples of literary techniques that fill in textual gaps are examined in the literary analyses of Perry and Sternberg: "Zehirut, Sifrut! Le-Be'ayot ha-Interpretatzia ve-ha-Poetika shel ha-Sippur ha-Mikrai", *Ha-Sifrut* 2, 3 (5730), pp. 608-663; "Ha-Melekh be-Mabat Ironi: Al Tachbulotav shel ha-Mesapper be-Sippur David u-Batsheva u-Shetei Haflagot le-Teoria shel ha-Proza", *Ha-Sifrut* 1,2 (5728), pp. 292-263. See also Sternberg's article, "Bein ha-Emet le-Kol ha-Emet be-Sippur

of ambiguity. The ambiguous expression refers to a phenomenon whereby a word, sentence, or any other communicative expression may be understood in more than one way, such that the reader is offered an additional perspective on the characters' feelings or hidden intentions, or on the biblical evaluation of their actions.

Let us begin by reviewing four narratives that include an ambiguous expression describing a sense of emotion or a show of honor. The ambiguous expression offers the reader two levels on which to understand the emotional ties between two characters, leading to a third possibility of an egalitarian, mutual equilibrium. The ambiguous expression creates the possibility of identifying with the reader's sense of the sort of relations that might be expected between the two characters, by allowing him to interpret the situation in what appears to him to be the most obvious and logical way, based on his prior knowledge of the characters involved. The possibility of another way of decoding the situation creates a surprise for the reader, reinforcing his evaluation of a character who has performed beyond what was expected of him.

Example 1: Yehuda's speech

Yehuda's speech is presented in the text as a last-ditch attempt by Yaakov's sons to save Binyamin, their youngest brother, from imprisonment in Egypt. The speech is characterized by sterling rhetoric, including the following ambiguous expression:

"We said to my lord, the lad cannot leave his father, for if he leaves his father, he shall die (*va-met*)." (*Bereishit* 44:22)

The sentence includes two subjects – the father and the lad. The word "*va-met*" – "he shall die" – seems, on the basis of our familiarity with the background to Yehuda's appeal, to be saying that the father might die in the event of having to be parted from his beloved son, Binyamin. However, it may also express the father's fear of the son dying – recalling what happened to Binyamin's brother, Yosef, when he left Yaakov's home. The continuation of the speech supports both interpretations. Verse 29 describes Yaakov's explicit fear concerning Binyamin's fate: "If you take this [son] too, from me, and some disaster befalls him," followed immediately by the result of this disaster: "you shall bring down my grey hairs with sorrow to Sheol."³

ha-Mikrai: Nekudat ha-Tatzpit ve-Itzuv Chayei ha-Nefesh be-Chadira ha-Sikkumit u-ve-Monolog ha-Penimi", *Ha-Sifrut* 29 (1979), pp. 110-146.

³ The commentators are divided as to the reference of the word "*va-met*." Some, including Rashbam and Seforno, view it as referring to Yaakov. Others understand it as referring to Binyamin. Rashi comments: "'If he leaves his father, he shall die' – if he leaves his father, we are concerned that he might die on the way, for his mother died on the way." Ramban: "'The lad cannot leave his father' – because of his youth, and the fact that he is a favored child in the bosom of his father, who loves him. If he leave him, and comes on the way, the boy will die." (Some view the continuation of the speech as maintaining the ambiguity: "And it will be, when he

In this example, the ambiguous expression is attributed to the speaker, whose task is to persuade the foreign ruler to release Binyamin. The ambiguity is part of a broad range of persuasive rhetorical techniques aimed at creating an emotional dimension that goes beyond the natural love and concern of a father for his son. The hint that the expression might also describe the son's dependence on his father indicates a unique bond of love and life-dependence.

Example 2: The meeting between Yosef and his father

The reunion between Yaakov and Yosef in Egypt is summed up in a mere two verses, describing what happens between them after a 22-year separation. The next time that we find an intimate encounter between father and son is where Yaakov, on his deathbed, addresses his parting words to Yosef.

The text provides limited information as to the feelings of the two characters when they meet. The encounter is described as follows:

"Yosef readied his chariot, and went up to meet Yisrael, his father, in Goshen; and he presented himself to him and he fell upon his neck, and wept on his neck for a good while." (*Bereishit* 46:29)

The verse includes five verbs. The first three describe Yosef's preparations and actions in anticipation of the encounter. The other two describe what happened during the encounter, but it is not clear which of the two characters initiates the "falling upon the neck" and the weeping.⁴ There are four

sees that the lad is not there, he will die [*va-met*]," or "when he sees that the lad is not there, and has died." However, here the possibility of interpreting "*va-met*" as referring to Binyamin seems less plausible from the syntactical point of view, since the proper formulation here would be, "When he sees that the boy has died (*ki met ha-na'ar*)." See *Bereishit* 50:15; *Shoftim* 9:55; *Shmuel* I 25:39; *Shmuel* II 31:5, and elsewhere. Even Rashi, who understands the word "*va-met*" in verse 22 as referring to Binyamin, comments here, "the father will die.")

The deliberate intention to create ambiguity in this instance is borne out by biblical parallels where the text takes care not to leave any doubt as to the identity of the person who will die. For example, *Devarim* 27:7 – "If someone be found stealing any person (*gonev nefesh*) of his brethren of Bnei Yisrael, and he deals with him as a slave or sells him, then that thief shall die (*u-met ha-ganav ha-hu*), and you shall remove the evil from your midst." The verse depicts two characters – the kidnapper and the victim. Had the text read simply "*u-met*," without stating explicitly that it is "that thief" who shall die, one might have concluded, based on the ambiguity, that the death penalty for the kidnapper exists only in the event that the victim himself died during (or as a result of) the kidnapping operation.

⁴ One might surmise that, in the absence of a new subject, the text attributes these actions to Yosef. However, in other places, the text usually repeats the name of the subject in order that the identity is clear. For instance, "Shaul said, Is that your voice, my son, David? And Shaul raised his voice and wept" (*Shmuel* I 24:16). On the other hand, there is an example of the text introducing a new subject in mid-verse, without indicating that the following verbs refer to the new subject; this is deduced from the context: "The man came into the house and he unfastened the camels, **and he gave** straw and fodder to the camels, and water to wash his feet and the feet of the men who were with him" (*Bereishit* 24:32). Avraham's servant is the subject of the sentence,

prior instances of Yosef weeping: when he sets eyes on his brothers for the first time in 22 years (*Bereishit* 42:24); when he sees Binyamin for the first time (43:30-31); following Yehuda's speech (45:1-2); and following his revelation to his brothers (45:14-15). It is therefore quite reasonable to posit that Yosef weeps at this encounter, too. On the other hand, we find Yaakov weeping when he meets Esav (33:4). (In that instance it is not Yaakov who initiates the embrace, for obvious reasons, since he is not sure of Esav's feelings towards him; nevertheless, once Esav embraces him, he weeps.) The reader's inability to decide the matter either way⁵ serves to strengthen the sense of mutual love in the actions of the father and the son. In its concise description of the feelings of Yaakov and Yosef, the text conveys the love that has not dimmed during the years of mourning experienced by the father, and the years of anguished questioning on the part of his son, who has struggled to make sense of his father's abandonment of him. All of this is forgotten in the tremendous excitement of the reunion.

Example 3: The relationship of love between Avraham and God

The mutual love between God and Avraham is treated explicitly in the text. God's love for Avraham is provided as the reason for sharing with him the intention to destroy Sedom:

"For I know him (*ki yeda'tiv*), that he will command his children and his household after him, and they will observe the way of God, to perform righteousness and justice, in order that God might bring upon Avraham that which He has spoken concerning him." (*Bereishit* 18:19)

The expression "to know" express the closest and most intimate relationship between people.⁶ The prophet Yishayahu describes the other side of this love: "And you, Israel, are My servant; Yaakov, whom I have chosen; the seed of Avraham, who loved Me" (*Yishayahu* 41:8).

A more covert expression of the mutual love between God and Avraham is found in the ambiguous expression describing Avraham's response to the promise of progeny:

but the acts of hospitality (from "and he gave") cannot be attributed to a servant who is depicted as observing a most impressive standard of manners. Clearly, the verse is reverting to its description of Lavan, mentioned in the previous verse. See also *Bereishit* 27:2, and elsewhere.

⁵ Ancient and modern exegesis alike have addressed both possibilities. Ramban and Ibn Ezra understand that it is Yaakov who weeps. Ibn Ezra explains, "It would not be respectful for Yosef to fall upon Yaakov's neck; rather, he would prostrate himself before him, or kiss his hands." Ramban: "Everyone knows who would be more liable to weep – an elderly father who discovers his son alive, after despairing and mourning him, or his first-born son, who is now a ruler." Rashi, in contrast, understands that it is Yosef who falls, kisses, and weeps.

⁶ See: *Bereishit* 4:1; 19:8; 24:15; *Bamidbar* 31:17; *Shoftim* 11:39; 21:12; *Melakhim* I 1:4, and elsewhere.

"And he believed in God, and He counted it to him as righteousness."
(*Bereishit* 15:6)

The words "He counted it to him as righteousness" may be interpreted as expressing God's appreciation for Avraham's faith – for at the time of the promise he is already of advanced age, and still childless.⁷ However, the expression also allows for the understanding that the verb, "he counted it," is a continuation of the description of the impression that the promise makes on Avraham.⁸

In this example, the ambiguity serves to glorify Avraham. If God does not take Avraham's faith in the promise of progeny for granted, expecting him to despair of the promise ever being fulfilled, then the possibility of Avraham not only having faith in God's promise but also believing that God's treatment of him goes beyond what he deserves, depicts Avraham as expecting no special Divine treatment despite the tests he has endured and the promises made to him. Every gesture of salvation, or promise for the future, is regarded by him as a Divine favor.

Example 4: The encounter between Moshe and Yitro

The reunion between Moshe and his father-in-law is described in our *parasha* as occurring after years of severance, while Moshe was in Egypt. Moshe's status as a fugitive seeking safety, as he comes across in the first meeting with Yitro, has been transformed beyond recognition. In the present encounter Moshe goes out towards his father-in-law as God's chosen, as the leader and savior who has turned a nation of slaves into a free people. The ambiguous expression surrounding the encounter allows for two different understandings of who it is who prostrates himself and kisses the other:

"Moshe went out to meet his father-in-law, and he prostrated himself and he kissed him, and they asked one another of their welfare, and they came into the tent." (*Shemot* 18:7)

The verb "he prostrated himself" appears in many biblical narratives describing encounters between people, but it is usually followed by a clear indication of the subject's identity.⁹ Both the Septuagint and the Samaritan translation of our verse solve the problem of the ambiguous verbs ("prostrated himself," "kissed") by converting them into the plural, thereby effectively

⁷ This represents Rashi's view: "God considered it meritorious and righteous on Avram's part that he had faith in Him."

⁸ This is the view of Ramban: "It seems to me that this means that he believed in God and believed that, in His righteousness, He would grant him progeny regardless, not only as a result of Avraham's righteousness and as a reward for it, even though He had told him, 'Your reward is very great.' From this point onwards he would not fear lest some sin cause the promise not to be fulfilled."

⁹ See *Bereishit* 47:31; *Shmuel* I 15:31, and elsewhere.

attributing them to Yitro's family, rather than to Moshe. The *Mekhilta*, in contrast, takes the view that it is Moshe who prostrates himself and kisses Yitro:

"He prostrated himself and he kissed him' – it is not clear who prostrated himself to who, or who kissed who. But when the text says, 'They asked one another (*ish le-re'ehu*) concerning their welfare' – who is called '*ish*'? This must be Moshe, as the Torah testifies (*Bamidbar* 12:3), 'The man (*ha-ish*) Moshe was exceedingly humble.' Hence, we must conclude that it was Moshe who prostrated himself and kissed his father-in-law. From here our sages said that a man must be prepared to honor his father-in-law." (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishma'el, Masekhta de-Amalek* 1, Horowitz-Rabin edition, p. 193)

The use of the ambiguous expression allows for a broadening of the messages that may be drawn from the brief textual account. The possibility that the actions are attributed to Moshe serves to amplify his humility. The possibility that the actions are attributed to Yitro serves to present him as someone who honors his son-in-law, recognizing his stature and seeking out his company – in contrast to other foreign dignitaries (Pharaoh, Amalek, and later on also Balak) who demonstrated hostility towards him and a desire to harm him and his nation.

The dual meaning indicates a mutual covenant between the two men, representing a microcosmic preview of the pledge of friendship that would arise between Israel and the family of the Keini over the course of the generations.¹⁰ At the same time, it represents a contrasting picture to the relations between Am Yisrael and Amalek, who attack the stragglers.¹¹ Early signs of the mutual alliance between Moshe and Yitro are described in the final unit before the Revelation at Sinai, which will define, for the first time, the identity of the chosen nation.

The importance of the story of Yitro and its location lie in the broadening of the conditions for acceptance of an individual or family into the "chosen people." The narratives in *Sefer Bereishit* describe the selection of individuals in each generation, whose actions demonstrate adherence to natural and human morality. The selection is made, in most cases, contrary to the usual rules pertaining to the firstborn, and independently of any other inborn quality; thus, they emphasize personal actions as the main parameter leading to selection. The Revelation at Sinai and the acceptance of the Torah define the identity of the chosen people who reached the "finals" – those who had withstood the test of

¹⁰ See *Shoftim* 1:16; 4:11; the actions of Yael, wife of Chever, the Keini (*Shoftim* 5:24); *Shmuel I* 15:6. However, see also *Shmuel I* 28:10.

¹¹ M.D. Cassuto notes the contrast between the war against Amalek and the encounter with Yitro, viewing this as the reason for placing Yitro's visit at this point, deviating from the chronological order of events. See: M.D. Cassuto, *Perush al Sefer Shemot*, Jerusalem 5748, pp. 145-146. As noted above, not all the commentators agree that this episode is shifted from its chronological place; nevertheless, the contrast with Amalek does indicate some sort of thematic connection between the two stories.

refinement that was the period of enslavement; passed through the sieve of the "fifth part;"¹² and presented themselves at the foot of the mountain, crying out, "We will do and we will hear." Prior to this redefinition, criteria are set for those who cannot be part of the nation, those who have no "fear of God" – in the sense of adhering to the most basic rules of morality. At the same time, there is a description of an unusual family within a nation deemed unfit; owing to the unique actions of this family, it merits to join the chosen people and to enjoy all the goodness promised to them.

Seemingly, one might explain the inclusion of Yitro's family amongst the chosen people on the basis of his acknowledgment of God: "Now I know that the Lord is greater than all the gods" (*Shemot* 18:11), a declaration expressing the profound, revolutionary theological process undertaken by someone who had been the priest of Midian. However, the Torah teaches that despite the value of this declaration, the mutual pact binding Moshe and Yitro was forged long before, having been formed at the moment of their reunion at the mountain of God: "And he prostrated himself before him, and he kissed him." Hence, we must seek the answer to the question of what is special about Yitro in the first meeting between them, when Moshe was still a persecuted stranger.

The attitude towards foreign and weaker elements in society represents the touchstone for the fundamental morality of the individual and of society. A person or a nation is chosen if, even when it is in a position of strength and placed alongside someone in a weaker position, the advantage is not exploited, but rather used to help the needy. Moshe flees his native Egypt and his royal adopted home for Midian, where he is at the mercy of the local inhabitants. He encounters Yitro's daughters, witnesses their troubles at the hands of the local shepherds, and assists them: "The shepherds came and banished them; and Moshe arose and saved them, **and he watered their flock**" (*Shemot* 2:7). However, having grown up in a social environment in which moral rules do not apply to female inhabitants, either, they see no need to repay the man in any way for helping them.

Against this savage background, Yitro's rebuke of his daughters for abandoning the stranger, and his generous invitation to host him for a meal at his home, stands out all the more prominently:

"He said to his daughters, But where is he? Why did you abandon the man? Call him that he may eat bread." (*Shemot* 2:20)

Moshe and Yitro both act differently from the norm in their social environment in the way they treat weaker and foreign elements. Moshe's offer to

¹² According to the view expressed in the *Mekhilta*: "And Bnei Yisrael went up 'chamushim' ('armed', or alternatively, 'divided by five'): one out of five; some say one out of fifty; and some say that only one out of five hundred went out" (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael*, Bo, *parasha* 12). This reduction is borne out by the census figures in *parashat Ki Tisa*.

water the flock, and Yitro's offer of bread to the "Egyptian stranger,"¹³ are also a contrast to the treatment by Moav and Ammon of the wandering nation seeking permission to travel through their borders:

"An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter God's congregation, even to their tenth generation they shall not come into God's congregation forever; for they did not meet you with bread and with water on the way when you came out of Egypt." (*Devarim* 23:4-5)¹⁴

Ammon and Moav owed a favor to Avraham, father of the Jewish nation, since he had saved Lot, their own forefather, from the destruction of Sedom. Therefore, their refusal to accede to the request by Bnei Yisrael to pass through their land represented ingratitude and cruelty towards their family relatives. Ramban writes:

"It seems to me that the Torah rejects these two tribes because they were the beneficiaries of Avraham's kindness in saving their father and mother from the sword and from captivity (*Bereishit* 14:16), and it was by his merit that God had sent them away from the overturning of the city (19:29). Hence, they were indebted to Israel, but they acted badly towards them instead."

Yitro's offer of bread to the stranger is repayment for the kindness which the stranger showed to his daughters, and according to Rabbi Yochanan, this itself is the distinction between those worthy of inclusion in God's congregation and those who are not:

"Rabbi Yochanan taught in the name of Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma: Great is a mouthful [of sustenance], for on its account two families were distanced from Israel, as it is written [concerning Ammon and Moav], 'for they did not meet you with bread and with water.' And Rabbi Yochanan, for his part, said: 'It distances those who are near, and brings near those who are distant, and causes [God's] eyes to be diverted from the wicked, and causes the Divine Presence to rest [even] upon the prophets of Ba'al. And an unintentional transgression in this regard is treated as a deliberate one. 'It distances those who are close' – this refers to Ammon and Moav; 'and brings near those who are distant' – Yitro...." (*Sanhedrin* 103b-104a)

¹³ As he is depicted by Yitro's daughters (*Shemot* 2:19).

¹⁴ On the seeming contradiction between this description of Moav's role in refusing the strangers passage, and the description in *Devarim* 2:28-29, see Rashbam on *Devarim* 2:29 and Ramban on *Devarim* 23:4-5. Ramban draws a distinction between Moav and Ammon in the reason why they are refused acceptance into the community. He argues that the reason for the rejection of Moav is their hiring of Bil'am ben Be'or, while Ammon is rejected "for they did not meet you...."

In the second year after the Exodus from Egypt, at the commencement of the journey to Eretz Yisrael, Moshe extends an invitation to Yitro to join Am Yisrael and to enjoy the blessings which God has promised to them:

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

And he said to him, I shall not go, but to my land and my birthplace shall I go.

And he said, I pray you, do not leave us, for you know how we shall encamp in the wilderness, and you will be as eyes for us. And it shall be, if you go with us, then the good that God will do to us – we shall do also to you." (*Bamidbar* 10:29-32)

The story of Yitro in our *parasha* explains Moshe's later invitation and promise to Yitro, presenting Yitro as having been an ally of his son-in-law even before the giving of the Torah. Yitro's recognition of the God of Israel was an essential prerequisite for his completing the process of joining the chosen nation, but this process had begun long before, in the first encounter between him and Moshe. There Yitro is shown to be a model character of high moral standards, quite unlike his pagan environment. The extensive description of Yitro's reunion with Moshe at the Mountain of God, Yitro's advice, and the negotiations calling for his joining the nation, are meant to signal to the reader that Yitro's actions and values should be contrasted with those of the other foreign leaders who come into contact with Am Yisrael. The comparison shows why the Torah's command that the others should not become part of the Israelite congregation, does not apply to Yitro's family. The deficiencies and immorality of their societies have not influenced Yitro's behavior, and he is even described as aspiring to correct defects in his native environment as well as amongst the nation which he seeks to join.

Translation by Kaeren Fish