

JETHRO/HOBAB'S DETAINMENT

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There are two passages in the Torah which record a visit or two separate visits (see below) to the Israelites in the desert by the father-in-law of Moses, described as the "Priest of Midian." In Exodus 18:1 his name is given as Jethro, though he is identified elsewhere by several other names, such as Jether (Ex. 4:18), Hobab (Num. 10:29; Jud. 4:11) and Reuel (Ex. 2:18). We are told that his visit to the Israelite camp was in order to bring Moses' wife Zipporah and their two sons to rejoin Moses (see Ex. 18:2-5). Moses had previously sent them back to his father-in-law's home after the enigmatic "bloody bridegroom" episode (4:18; 20-26), not wishing to be encumbered by them or expose them to danger as he approached Egypt to commence his mission to secure the release of the Israelites.

Jethro's visit was quite brief, but he took the opportunity of expressing his joy at all that God had done for Israel, while offering thanksgiving sacrifices and giving Moses some useful advice regarding the restructuring of the judicial process. He is then "sent on his way" back to Midian, an act that is clearly implied in the Hebrew phrase: *Vaeshalach Mosheh et chotmo* [And Moses sent away his father-in-law] (18:27).

The next we hear of Moses' father-in-law is in Numbers 10:29-32, where he is described once again as on a visit to the Israelite camp, though the name Hobab is substituted here for Jethro. The main thrust of this passage seems to be Moses' attempt to persuade Hobab not to return to his home in Midian, but to stay and throw in his lot with the Israelites.

And Moses said unto Hobab, the son of Reuel the Midianite,¹ Moses' father-in-law: 'We are journeying unto the place of which the Lord said: I will give it to you. Come thou with us, and we will do thee good; for the Lord hath spoken good concerning Israel.' And he replied to him, 'I will not go anywhere but to my own land and kindred.' And he [Moses] said: 'Do not desert us, I pray thee,

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for thou knowest where we should encamp in the wilderness, and thou shalt be to us instead of eyes.'

ONE OR TWO VISITS?

Now, it is unclear whether this passage represents a continuation of the account of the original visit or whether it describes a second visit. The generally accepted view of the rabbis is that Jethro/Hobab paid just the one visit but, for some reason, the account of that visit has been separated into two sections, the first allocated to Exodus and the second to Numbers.

But this approach brings the rabbis up against a major chronological problem: Since the first part of the episode is placed before the giving of the Torah and the second part afterwards, how do we know whether Jethro came before or after that event?

The great exegete, Nahmanides,² follows the talmudic view of Rabbi Joshua³ that Jethro came before the giving of the Torah,⁴ which would explain why the Torah lists only the release from Egypt and not the greatest event of all – the Divine revelation to Israel – among the occurrences that had impelled Jethro to come to visit the Israelites (Ex. 18:1). It also explains why Moses did not include mention of that unique event when he tells Jethro of all the great things God had done for the nation since they last met (18:8).

Nahmanides understands the reference to Jethro's arrival at *the mountain of the Lord* (18:5) as suggesting that he came to the Israelite camp at Rephidim in the first year – only a few months after the Exodus – during the period when Israel was just preparing itself to receive the Torah (19:2). It is true that Jethro acknowledges that God is greater than all the other gods (18:11) but it is not necessarily a rejection of idolatry. It is merely an affirmation that the Israelite God has proved superiority over the others. At most, Jethro went through the motions of accepting Israel's God – and hence the meal and the sacrifices that he offered – but he had misgivings on the following day (18:13), and retracted his commitment. This would explain his peremptory dismissal from the camp on that same day: *And Moses sent away his father-in-law* (18:27), namely "He distanced him from the Glorious One of the World."⁵

Following Nahmanides' view, Jethro/Hobab paid a further visit to the Israelite camp though the reason for his second visit is not stated. There are some

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cogent arguments for the assumption that Moses made every effort to convince his father-in-law to remain, and succeeded. For we read in Judges 1:16: *The descendants of the Kenite, the father-in-law of Moses, went up with the Judites from the City of Palms to the wilderness of Judah*

MOSES DETAINS JETHRO

If we examine the reason Moses gives Hobab for pressing him not to leave the camp, we find it problematic on several counts. Moses asserts that, as Israel is about to approach the Promised Land, and as the route they are about to take (through the wildernesses of Sinai and Paran) borders on Hobab's Midian, Hobab's guidance is required in order to ensure that Israel is able safely to negotiate the hazards of the last lap of their journey.

It is important to note that this particular visit took place just over a year after they had left Egypt (See: Num. 10:11), and before the fateful sentence of a 40-year wandering, imposed upon Israel as punishment for the sin of the spies and the nation's wholesale lack of faith in God's ability to bring them to the Promised Land (See: Num. 14:33-34). Hence, at this juncture, Moses was convinced that the nation's journeying was about to reach its conclusion – a point that he emphasizes to his father-in-law in the words *We are about to move* [into the land.] (Num. 10:29). Hence the midrashic comment, "We are journeying immediately to the Land of Israel. Not as on previous occasions when we journeyed and then encamped. On this occasion we go direct to the Land of Israel."⁶ This substantiates Nahmanides' thesis that Jethro paid two visits to the camp. Had he paid but one visit, but a little while after they had left Egypt, the information that they were traveling to the land of Israel would have been superfluous. Jethro knew precisely the objective of the Israelites, and it was for that reason that he brought his daughter and grandchildren, at the earliest opportunity, to join the camp on the last lap of its journey into destiny. The phrase only has significance in the context of a later stage of Israel's progress, as a disclosure to him by Moses that all Israel's encampments were now behind them and their journey was reaching its end.

It might be thought, therefore, that this explanation that Moses was now offering Hobab, for requiring his presence and guidance along the desert routes that straddle his country of Midian, might have sounded quite plausible to his father-in-law. Nevertheless, there are several inherent problems.

First, Moses had himself spent a lengthy period at Jethro's home, where he had first fled as a fugitive after having killed the Egyptian (Ex. 2:15ff). The Torah tells us that, serving as shepherd of Jethro's flock *he led the flock to the farthest end of the desert* [vayinhag et hatzon ACHAR hamidbar] *to the Mountain of the Lord at Horeb* (3:1). So Moses would have known that entire region – from Sinai to the Promised Land – every bit as well as, if not better than, his father-in-law. How, then, could Moses now claim to need Hobab as a guide, saying, *Do not desert us, for thou knowest where we should encamp in the wilderness?* (Num. 10:31).

We may wonder why, on his subsequent visit, all tokens of respect, as evidenced in the first visit, are missing. Indeed, we are not even told that Hobab had actually come to the Israelite camp. The first we learn of it is in the context of Moses' attempt to prevent him returning home!

Most surprising of all, the Torah actually suppresses the salient detail of whether or not Moses actually succeeded in persuading his father-in-law to stay! What comes over very clearly, however, is the vehemence with which Hobab rejects Moses' plea: *And he said to him: 'I shall not go anywhere but to my own land and kindred'* (Num. 10:30).

MOTIVE FOR JETHRO'S DETENTION

We may conjecture that Moses was simply using a ploy for keeping his father-in-law within the Israelite camp. His reason for doing so may well have been that, either by means of his prophetic powers or through a disclosure while he was on Sinai, Moses became aware that Israel and Midian were destined to fight a bloody war. The cause of this was the Midianite attempt to destroy the people of Israel and alienate them from their God by enticing them into idolatrous and immoral practices (See: Num. 25:14-19). So ferocious was that battle that Israel put every male to the sword (Num. 31:7). Thus, had Moses not invented that "ruse" for preventing his father-in-law's return home, Hobab would have perished in the general débâcle at the hands of Israel.

This consideration might also help resolve the problem: Why, on Hobab's second visit, not only does he receive no welcome from Moses, Aaron or the elders, but the Torah does not even bother to tell us that he had even entered the Israelite camp? We suggest that this was because his visit was of minor

interest in the context of the Israelite history of the period. Under normal circumstances it would not have merited mention. It was only his impending desire to return home that created the dilemma for Moses. And, in the light of subsequent events, the way Moses succeeded in resolving that dilemma – by inventing an excuse to save Hobab's life – is all that concerns us.

To Moses' explanation that he needed him to serve as a guide, Hobab would assuredly have retorted, "But you know the terrain, from Sinai to Canaan, better than I!" Furthermore, bearing in mind that the Israelites were accompanied by a *pillar of cloud by day, to lead them the way, and a pillar of fire by night, to give them light; that they might journey by day and by night* (Ex.13:21), the suggestion that they required Hobab's expertise as a guide would have been absurd – even to Hobab! It is impossible, therefore, that Moses could even have been suggesting such a lame excuse when employing the phrase *v'hayyita lanu l'einayim*.

We are drawn, therefore, to offer a much less charitable explanation of Moses' motive in detaining his father-in-law, one which involves us in a departure from the accepted translations of the words Moses utters to explain his decision: *Ki al kein yada'ta chanoteinu bamidbar, v'hayyita lanu l'einayim*. This is traditionally rendered, 'For you know where we ought to camp in the wilderness, and you will be our guide' [lit. 'eyes'] (Num. 10:31). This verse may also yield a completely different meaning, one which gives proper emphasis to the phrase *Ki al kein* [for on account of the fact that. . .] and which renders more literally the past tense sense of the verb *yada'ta* [you have known]. We offer the rendering, "For, on account of the fact that you have (now) learnt where we intend to camp, you may become the cause of (hostile) eyes being cast upon us." The noun *ayin* occurs in the participial [qere] form *oyyein*, where it refers to Saul looking with "hostile eyes" upon David (I Sam. 18:9).

The word *lanu*, in the phrase *v'hayyita lanu*, may be construed as a *dativus incommodi*, namely, the dative of disadvantage.⁷ As such, it yields the (literal) meaning, "And you may be, to our harm, the cause of eyes [being cast upon us]." In other words, you will endanger us by disclosing our position and giving our enemies a military advantage.⁸ Thus, Moses may well have justified his detention of Hobab in the camp on the grounds that, during the period of his visit, and while spending much time at Moses' headquarters, he might

well have become privy to confidential travel routes and secret invasion plans. Were Moses to allow Hobab to return home, he would have been placing him in a most vulnerable situation, as such details as he had gleaned of Israel's planned stopping-places might easily have been forcibly extracted from him, thereby enabling Israel's hostile neighbors to lay an ambush while she was in the process of encamping, with their battle formations awry.

Moses' fears on that score were understandable bearing in mind that, but a little while earlier, Israel had fallen into such a trap in the battle against the Amalekites. The latter had clearly set an ambush for Israel, as reflected in the words *asher karkha baderekh* [how he fell upon thee along the way], cutting off the weak tail-enders after the main body had passed by (Deut. 25:18).

Whatever Moses' motive in detaining his father-in-law, the end result was that Jethro's life was saved by Moses. Jethro did not return home, to perish with the rest of his kinsmen, the Midianites, the future arch-enemies of Israel, as otherwise there could not have been any tribal descendants of his remaining during the period of King Saul. Secondly, Judges 1:16 tells us quite specifically that Hobab's descendants (referred to there as 'sons of the Kenite, father-in-law of Moses') entered the Promised Land and settled in 'the city of the palm trees,' namely Jericho (See: II Chr. 28:15).

NOTES

1. Numbers 10:29 suggests, however, that Reuel was, in fact, the father of Jethro/Hobab.
2. See Peirush HaRamban al HaTorah on Exodus 18:1.
3. B. Talmud, Zevachim 116a.
4. See Zohar II, 69b; Targum Yerushalmi on Ex. 18:6. This also seems to be the assumption of B. Talmud, Sanhedrin 94a (See Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, VI, p.27, n.156).
5. Mekhilta Jethro ad loc. We follow the reading of the Yalkut here (shelacho mikhvodo shel olam), rather than the alternative reading, bikhvodo shel olam – an awkward phrase, unsatisfactorily rendered by Meir Ish Shalom (Sefer Mekhilta D'Rabbi Ishmael, Vienna, 1948) as, "with great honors". In this interpretation of R. Joshua's position – namely, that Jethro did not convert – we follow the view of the Ohr HaChayyim (See his comment on Numbers 10:30, d"ח. Kiy im el artziy).
6. Sifrei, ad loc.
7. See E. Kautzsch, ed., Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar (Oxford University Press, 1910, p. 381 (#119s). This is the opposite of the dativus commodi, the dative of advantage, in such a phrase as *Lekh lekha*, 'Go for yourself', that is, 'for your advantage.' (See Rashi on Genesis 12:1 – 'For your benefit and your good.'
8. Another example of the use of *lanu* as a dativus incommodi is Ezekiel 37:11, *nigzarnu lanu*, *We have been totally cut down* (lit. 'we have been cut down, to our total undoing.')

RESPONSES from
Rabbi Hayyim Halpern's book
TORAH DIALOGUES

1. The word Jubilee יובל. Used as a fiftieth or sometimes as a twenty-fifth anniversary event. In biblical Hebrew, it actually refers to a ram's horn (see: Exodus 19:13; Joshua 6:44ff).
2. Judah is the largest tribe and the natural leader among his brothers. Reuben is the eldest brother. Dan is the second largest tribe (1:39) and is known for his military prowess (cf. Samson). Ephraim is the heir of Joseph, eldest son of Rachel, and a powerful tribe.
3. Throughout the incidents recounted in Exodus, Moses appeals to God on behalf of his charges. Here he seems to have reached the limits of his patience.
4. The rules in Parashat Kedoshim deal with ethical, economic, ritual, moral and familial aspects of life. We may therefore assume that *kedushah* (holiness) is attained by following the dictates of the Torah in virtually all realms of life. The Midrash (Sifra, Lev. Rabbah) declares that Chapter 19 in Leviticus was proclaimed before an assembly of all Israel (see. v. 2) because it encompasses "most of the fundamentals of the Torah גופי תורה."