''*Yitro*: Why Moses sought to detain his father-in-law''

by Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

(Adapted, with permission, from my article, ''Jethro/Hobab's detainment,''
Jewish Bible Quarterly, April-June 2004, pp.115-121)

I wish to analyse just one aspect of the relationship of Moses and Yitro his father-in –law, the account of which began with the first sidrah of Shemot and is continued in this week's sidrah, with Yitro bringing his daughter, Tzipporah, and her and Moses' two sons to be reunited with their father (see Ex. 18:2-5). Moses had previously sent them back to stay at his father-in-law's home, in order not to become encumbered with them or to expose them to danger as he approached Egypt to embark on his mission to secure the release of the Israelites (see Ex. 4:18, 20-26).

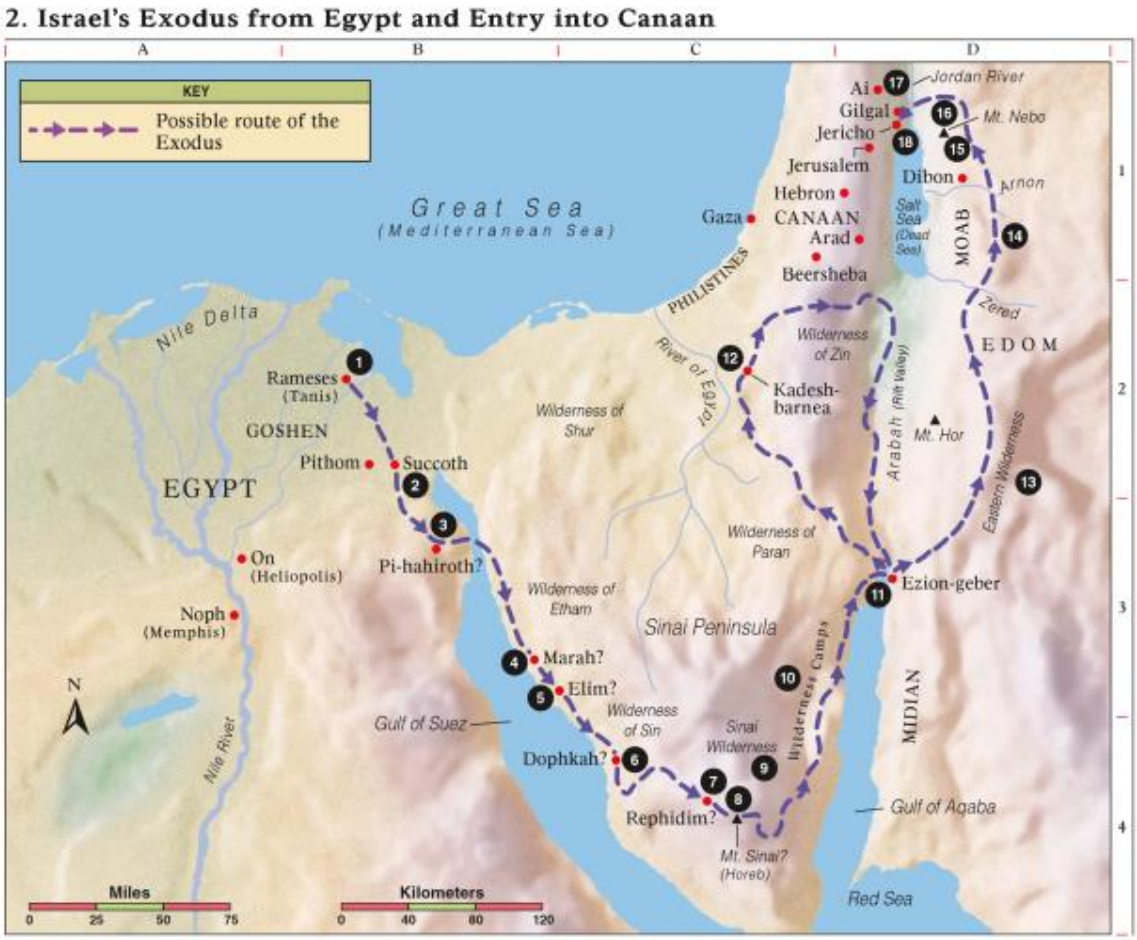
After giving Moses advice as to how to lighten his load by devolving the judiciary, we are told that,וישלח מֹשֶׁה אֶת-חֹתְנוֹ וַיֵּלֶךְ לוֹ אֶל-אַרְצוֹ - 'Moses sent his father-in-law back, and he returned to his country' (Ex. 18:27). The next we hear of Yitro is in Nu. 10:29-32, where he is described once again as on a visit to the Israelite camp, though, on that occasion, the name Chovav is, enigmatically, substituted for Yitro. The main thrust of that passage is Moses' attempt to persuade his father-in-law ***not*** to return to his home in Midian, but to stay and throw in his lot with the Israelites:

וַיֹּאמֶר, אַל-נָא תַּעֲזֹב אֹתָנוּ: כִּי עַל-כֵּן יָדַעְתָּ, חֲנֹתֵנוּ בַּמִּדְבָּר, וְהָיִיתָ לָּנוּ, לְעֵינָיִם. וְהָיָה כִּי-תֵלֵךְ עִמָּנוּ וְהָיָה הַטּוֹב הַהוּא אֲשֶׁר יֵיטִיב יְהוָה עִמָּנוּ וְהֵטַבְנוּ לָךְ.

> And he said: 'Please do not leave us, insomuch as you know where we should camp in the wilderness and ***you can be our guide***. So, if you come, we will extend to you the same bounty that the Lord grants us' (Nu. 10:31-32: *Jewish Publ. Soc*. translation).

Now, I have examined over twenty English translations of this verse, and they all follow each other in understanding the phrase והיית לנו לעינים – 'and you can be our guide' (literally, 'as our eyes') - in a complimentary sense, namely that Moses is suggesting to Yitro that his

presence and knowledge of the region and terrain will be vital to the Israelites, and that they will rely on him to be their guide on the forthcoming, and probably trickiest, stage of their journey into, and invasion of, Canaan, which would involve a sweep around the northern border of Midian at Etzion Gever.



Now, this is problematic when we consider that, when Moses lived with Yitro, and shepherded his large flocks (Ex. 3:1), it states: וינהג את הצאן **אחר המדבר**, 'he led the sheep to pasture *to the furthest part* of the desert.' This refers to the border with Edom, which is precisely the area around Etzion Gever (See map: 3c-d) where the Israelites would travel on the last lap of their journey, according to most scholars. Thus, Moses knew that area far better than Yitro, who, as a priest would have led a fairly confined life and would have had no reason to travel so far north into that bleak and uninhabited part of the country! So that

explanation of Moses' motive in preventing the return of Yitro to his own land is unconvincing.

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 (Chovav-)Yitro's expertise as a guide would have made no sense! It would have been unthinkable, therefore, for Moses to have suggested such a transparently bizarre excuse for detaining Yitro. It seems clear, therefore, that we must search for an alternative explanation of the phrase והיית לנו לעינים – 'And you can be our guide,' and, more significantly, for why Moses was so determined to detain his father-in-law.

I believe, therefore, that we should explore a diametrically opposite sense in which Moses' words may be understood, one that also has the advantage of being faithful to the past tense of the Hebrew verb *yada'ta* (Nu. 10:31: See above, pp.1-2)) – which may be rendered, 'you *have come to know* (our encampment)' - as opposed to the standard translations' present tense rendering, 'you know'. Our explanation will also justify the otherwise unnecessary emphasis (ידעת) כי על כן - literally, '*for*, *for that very reason* (that you have come to know…).' It will also account for the emphatic repetitiveness of Moses' promise of reward in his attempt to persuade Yitro to stay: לְכָה אִתָּנוּ וְהֵטַבְנוּ לָךְ - 'Come with us and we will treat you well'), followed by וְהָיָה הַטּוֹב הַהוּא, אֲשֶׁר ייטִיב יְהוָה עִמָּנוּ-וְהֵטַבְנוּ לָךְ – 'And that goodly treatment that the Lord has bestowed on us, we will bestow on you.' Note the four-fold repetition of the word טוב!

From Yitro's perspective, we may indeed wonder what compelling inducement could persuade a man of his age to give up his country, his people, his other six daughters and their families, and his comfortable and settled existence as Priest of Midian, to live out the remainder of his life roaming the desert with the Israelites and suffering the inevitable discomfort, battles, skirmishes and uncertainty, that lay ahead as they attempted their invasion of Canaan!

The interpretation we shall offer also has the benefit of explaining why the name Chovav is substituted in just this context for Yitro, as well as its precise implication. To date, I have not

found any plausible explanation for the name change, other than the joke that the reason why Yitro had, as we know, seven names, is because he had to marry off seven daughters, and, for each marriage, the overdraft he took from the bank sent him into bankruptcy, to the extent that he felt it necessary to change his name so frequently! However, that does not elucidate the name Chovav, or why the Torah only employs it in the particular context of Moses' attempt to prevent his return to Midian.

We turn now to our interpretation of the words of Moses –

כִּי עַל כֵּן יָדַעְתָּ - "For, because you have *got to know* ***so well*** (during your stay with us)

חֲנֹתֵנוּ בַּמִּדְבָּר - where we intend to camp in the desert (i.e. our invasion plans),

וְהָיִיתָ לָּנוּ לְעֵינָיִם - *you may well become* the cause of (*hostile)* eyes probing us."

This pejorative sense of the term עינים ('eyes') is found in a number of passages, such as when Saul 'eyed' David, that is began looking at him with hostile intent – וַיְהִי שָׁאוּל **עוֹיֵן** אֶת-דָּוִד, מֵהַיּוֹם הַהוּא וָהָלְאָה (I Sam. 18:9). Hence, our verse (Nu. 10:31) may be justifiably interpreted as a rationale of Moses' fear of letting Yitro return home where he might be forced into revealing the Israelite invasion plans, and further the hostile intent of Israel's enemies. Had it simply been a matter of wanting to enlist Yitro's services as 'a guide' for *the final leg* of the journey – as favoured by the regular translations - then we might well ask what special expertise is suggested by the phrase כי על כן ידעת חנותינו , that he knew Israel's *past* journeying? So did every other Israelite! As they say in the investment world: "*Past* performance is no guarantee of future results!"

Thus, I suggest, Moses justified his detainment of Chovav in the camp on this occasion on the grounds that, during the period of his visit, and while spending time at Moses' headquarters, he had become privy to confidential travel routes and secret invasion plans, euphemistically referred to as חנותינו -'our encampment.'

Were Moses to have permitted Chovav to return home, he would have been placed in mortal danger, as the details he had gleaned of Israel's military preparedness, weaponry,

planned routes and stopping-places, could easily have been forcibly extracted from him by the Midianites and passed on to their hostile neighbouring allies, who might ambush him on his journey back home.

Hence our suggestion that the phrase והיית לנו לעינים connotes a fear for the *future* safety of Yitro, who must have become a figure of hate and suspicion, on the part of his own Midianite tribe and the neighbouring ones, given that his own son-in-law was leading the impending Israelite invasion. Hence Moses' understandable fear that they would be able to extract from him by force the information to which they were sure he was privy.

Moses also would have foreseen the wholesale bloodshed that would one day inevitably accompany the destruction of the idolatrous and degenerate Peor-worshipping Midianites (See Nu. 25:1-9; 31:1-12) who had already targeted Israel and emerged as the greatest threat to her physical existence and moral integrity (See Nu. 25: 16-18). He knew then, that, if his father-in-law returned home, his days were numbered, and he would fall victim either to his countrymen's revenge or as a casualty of the planned military retribution to be visited on the Midianites. On both counts, he could not allow Yitro to return.

Thus, Yitro's life was saved by Moses, to the extent that, on the evidence of the Book of Judges (1:16), his 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), where they thrived during the period of King Saul.

We are now in a position to explain why the name חובב was employed in this episode. The word means, literally, 'the beloved one', (from the word חיבה, meaning 'love' (as in אף חובב עמים: Deut. 33:3). Chovav, as a passive form, means, 'the one to whom love was displayed'. Moses was being cruel to be kind. He was showing his love and concern for the safety of a man whom he had come to respect and admire, and from whom he – Moses, the law-giver – had even taken advice as regards the restructuring of the legal administration within the camp.

So, in addition to the two other individuals whose lives were saved by Moses, at the very outset of his career, we must add the name of his father-in-law, Yitro, who, we suggest, was also saved from certain death by the timely foresight and intervention of Moses.

And this might also explain the double emphasis: וְהָיָה הַטּוֹב הַהוּא, אֲשֶׁר יֵיטִיב ה" עִמָּנוּ וְהֵטַבְנוּ לָךְ - '(By remaining with us) the *goodly protection* that God affords us will be afforded to you.' Your life will be saved, together with those of God's people.

Shabbat shalom

Rabbi Jeffrey