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## WITHIN AND WITHOUT OUR ENCAMPMENT IN THE DESERT: The Ambivalent Acceptance of a Biblical Convert

### I

Ambivalence regarding the status of the *ger* (convert) as a full member of the Jewish people is not a recent phenomenon. R. Yehuda Halevi<sup>1</sup> asserts that while Gentiles may join the Jewish faith they can never attain prophecy, which was reserved for pure-blooded Jews. Rambam (Maimonides), on the other hand, in a halakhic response to Ovadiah the *ger*,<sup>2</sup> asserts that there is no difference between Ovadiah and any other Jew in any aspect, even to the extent that the proselyte could refer to God as "Our God and God of Our Fathers." Here we will investigate a biblical incident at the genesis of Jewish nationhood that illustrates the tension regarding the proselyte and his inclusion within the covenant. In *Bemidbar* 10:29-32, Moshe invites his father-in-law, Hovav, to join the Jewish people in their journey as they enter their promised land. Hovav declines the invitation and Moshe, unhappy with Hovav's response, persists and apparently repeats the invitation. We never learn from the text whether Hovav is convinced by Moshe to join or if he maintains his original distance.<sup>3</sup>

### II

Hovav is over-identified. Not only is he introduced by his name, Hovav, but he is described as (a) *ben Re'uel*, (b) *ha-Midyani* and (c) *hoten Moshe* as well. Perhaps the identifier "*ben Re'uel*" is necessary, after all, this is Hovav's first appearance in the *Humash*. And even if it were necessary to inform us of his relationship to Moshe (*hoten*), why must he be identified as a Midianite? In fact, if (as the Midrash states) Hovav is Yitro, why not simply call him by the name by which we already know him?<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly enough, Yitro is also over-identified in the other places in the Torah where he is mentioned. He is first introduced in *Shmot* 2:16 as *kohen Midyan* and later (v. 18) identified by the name *Re'uel*, only to lose

his name and be known by the generic *ha-ish* (v. 21). When Moshe then shepherds Yitro's flocks, Yitro is called (3:1) (a) Yitro, (b) *hotno* and (c) *kohen Midyan*, yet when Moshe returns from his first encounter with the Divine (4:18), Yitro is identified only as (a) Yeter and (b) *hotno*. Similarly, in the opening of *parashat Yitro* he is identified by the name Yitro as well as by the descriptions *kohen Midyan* and *hoten Moshe*. By the second verse, the description *kohen Midyan* is missing, and by verse 8 he is either called by name or identified via his relationship with Moshe.

Surely each of his names and identifiers has a specific connotation, their change indicating either a shift in his status or, at the very least, a different dimension to which our attention is being called. In *parashat Yitro* for example, the disappearance of the description *kohen Midyan* seems to indicate that although he initially was a Midianite priest, he ceased to function as such soon after his association with Moshe.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Rashi and the *Mekhilta* assume that the story of Yitro's joining Moshe in the desert is, in essence, a tale of his conversion to Judaism, and that the changes in his name are indicative of that.<sup>6</sup>

In our section too, Hovav's names and epithets reflect significant aspects of his identity. According to *Sifre*, he is called Hovav because he loved (*hibbev*) the Torah and Re'uel because he was the friend of God (*re'o shel el*).<sup>7</sup> But if these names point to his closeness to the Jewish religion, *ha-Midyani* indicates his distance. In the religious sphere he might well be a Jew, having converted to Judaism and accepted *mitsvot*; hence he can no longer be called "*kohen Midyan*." Nonetheless, in terms of nationality, even his own son-in-law Moshe viewed and identified him as a Midianite.<sup>8</sup> His identification papers, as it were, list "Jew" under the category of religion, but "Midianite" under the category of nationality.<sup>9</sup> It appears that the convert is not completely accepted by those he seeks to join, and if this is the case with Moshe's father-in-law how much more so with any other convert.

In fact, the status of the convert had been addressed earlier in *Sefer Bemidbar*. In the opening chapters, which establish the organization of the camp of the Jews in the desert and in which tribal and familial affiliation are of paramount importance, no place is set aside for the convert.<sup>10</sup> Lest we think that the convert is any less of a Jew than the rest of us, the Torah immediately establishes protection for him. One of the first *mitsvot* discussed following the organization of the camp is that of stealing from the convert.<sup>11</sup> Presumably, the Torah rectifies the omission of the *ger* from the camp by according him special status in other respects.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, in chapter 9 the Torah goes to great lengths to assert repeatedly that the convert partakes in the Paschal sacrifice no differently than any other Jew.<sup>13</sup> The Torah already specified that the *ger* is to participate in the sacrifice,<sup>14</sup> which is a major component of Jewish identification and inclusion within the *brit avot*. The insistence on stressing and repeating the convert's involvement in the *korban Pesah* only serve to further emphasize

the concern for viewing the convert as an integral part of the Jewish people. On the other hand, immediately after the *korban Pesah* the Jews begin preparations for their entry to the land. The tribal division for travel to the land and the battle to conquer it are reemphasized; the convert is excluded.<sup>15</sup> He is an insider, but always left *mihuts la-mahane*, an outsider.

Hovav may have always been aware that he had no portion in the land of the Jews, even though the specifics of the partition of the land weren't clarified till the end of *Bemidbar*. Now he understands from Moshe's comment that he is still considered a Midianite, an outsider. His rejection<sup>16</sup> of Moshe's invitation is quite understandable: he has no need to go to a land of which he has no portion or to join a nation in which he is not welcome.<sup>17</sup> Hence his response, "I would rather go to *my* land and to *my moledet* (emphasis added)." In the words of the Sifre, "to go to the place God said 'I will give to you'—but converts have no portion in it."<sup>18</sup>

### III

The terminology Hovav uses in his rejection of Moshe's invitation, *erets* and *moledet*, is familiar from prior usage in the Torah. When Avraham was commanded to leave his home in *Breshit* 12, he was asked to leave his *erets*, his *moledet*, and his father's home, in return for which God established with him the tripartite covenant including the land, the people, and the religion. In other words, he will receive a new *erets* (replacing the land he left behind), a new *moledet* (replacing the nation he left behind),<sup>19</sup> and a new religion (replacing the one—his father's home—he left behind).

Joining the covenant is fundamentally an act of conversion. When Avraham left his *erets*, *moledet* and *bet av* to replace them with covenantal ones, he became both the first convert and the prototype for all future converts.<sup>20</sup> Ruth's proclamation to Naomi ("Your place is mine, your nation is mine, your God is mine"<sup>21</sup>) has the same implication. Rambam requires that, aside from the acceptance of *mitsvot*, the convert embrace Jewish nationhood.<sup>22</sup> Hovav had already left his *bet av*; he could no longer be identified as *kohen Midyan*. He wanted to participate fully in the covenant, but knew that he would have no part in the land and inferred (from the language of Moshe's invitation) that he would not be accepted as part of the nation. His response: "I would rather go to my land and my moledet." If the Jewish nation will not accord him land or recognize his citizenship as being equal to theirs, he would rather return to his own nation.

### IV

In light of the above analysis of Moshe's initial invitation and Hovav's response, Moshe's apparent repetition of the invitation takes on new meaning.

**First speech**

(v. 29) And Moshe said to Hovav  
ben Re'uel the Midianite, his  
father-in-law,

We are now travelling to the place  
God promised, "I will give it to you,"

go *ittanu*

we will do good for you,  
for God has spoken of goodness  
for Yisrael.

**Second speech**

(v. 31) And [Moshe] said,

Please do not leave us,

*ki 'al ken* you are familiar with our  
encampments in the desert, and  
can be for us a guide

(v. 32) and if you go *'immanu*

the goodness that God will provide  
for us

we will share with you.

In Moshe's response, all names and descriptions of his father-in-law are absent. So is the invitation. Moshe no longer asks Hovav to join, as one might an outsider, but requests of him not to leave. If the initial presumption was that Hovav was not welcome without an invitation, that Hovav was an outsider, Moshe's response indicates a change in perspective. Hovav is now considered an integral part of the people and as such it is natural for him to remain with them. It is his departure which should be considered an aberration; Moshe therefore asks him not to leave. In essence, Moshe has informed Hovav that he has a new *moledet*, that he is accepted.

The word *ittanu* of the initial invitation has been replaced with *'immanu*, and there is a significant difference between them. *Netsiv* suggests that *ittanu* describes a situation in which the bond between the participants is superficial, whereas *'immanu* indicates a fundamental commonality of goal and purpose.<sup>23</sup> Commuters who happen to board and leave a train at the same stations and share nothing other than the transportation are travelling *ehad et hasheni*. Members of an army unit travelling in formation are functioning *ehad 'im hasheni*. In Moshe's invitation he suggests that Hovav travel *ittanu*, whereas after hearing Hovav's response he requests that Hovav remain *'immanu*.<sup>24</sup>

A third change revolves around the "good" that is promised to Hovav

as an incentive for his joining the Jews on their journey. In the initial invitation Hovav is told that God has promised goodness to His people, apparently referring to the land of Israel, and that those people will do good for Hovav. No intrinsic connection is made between what the Jews will receive from God and what they promise to give to Hovav. It is the Jews, and not Hovav, who will have goodness (read, land) bestowed upon them by God. Hovav will, however, be a beneficiary of the kindness of the Jews. But to Hovav, this "second-class" citizenship was unacceptable.

This reaction placed Moshe in a quandary. Denial of Hovav's implied request for land would confirm his suspicions regarding his acceptance as an equal member of the nation; but converts are not accorded rights to the Land. Moshe's solution: the Jews will share their own land with Hovav. Hovav will receive land, however not as a *halakhic* entitlement, but as a gift from his new nation. Hovav's path to a stake in the homeland may differ from that of the rest of the nation, but the end result is essentially the same.

According to the *Sifre*, Hovav and his descendants were actually given the city of Yerikho and its environs.<sup>25</sup> Ramban adds, "In my opinion, Hovav was appeased with this."<sup>26</sup> Hovav initially took issue with his being excluded from both the land and the nation, and Moshe recognized the justness in Hovav's complaints. He responded to both within *halakhically* acceptable guidelines, going beyond what Hovav believed *halakhically* possible.

## V

Still puzzling is the additional comment inserted by Moshe before responding to Hovav's reasons for refusing to accompany the Jews. In verse 31 Moshe adds, "*ki 'al ken* you know our encampments in the desert, and can be for us a guide," seemingly unrelated to either his initial invitation or to Hovav's response to that invitation. Moshe, in saying "and [you] can be for us a guide," appears to be offering Hovav the opportunity to be a guide for the Jewish people through the desert. Yet the previous chapter clearly describes the travels of the Jews through the desert as guided by God, communicated via the ascending and descending cloud over the *mishkan*.<sup>27</sup> What sort of role, then, could Moshe be proposing for his father-in-law?

The phrase *ki 'al ken* is an enigmatic one which appears a number of times in the Torah.<sup>28</sup> Rashi divides the phrase so that it reads: the reason (*ki*) the previously mentioned event happened, or the reason (*ki*) I have asked the previous thing of you, is that (*'al ken*—read, *'al asher*) the following factors exist. For example, when inviting his guests, Avraham says, "*ki 'al ken* you have passed by your servant (me)."<sup>29</sup> Rashi understands this to mean, "the reason (*ki*) I ask of you to enter as my guests is because (*'al ken*) I am honored by your passing by my way."<sup>30</sup> In our text he suggests, "the reason

(*ki*) it is proper for you to accede to my request is because (*'al ken*) you know our encampments in the desert and have seen the miracles that have been done for us." Even were we to accept Rashi's approach to *ki 'al ken* in general, our passage presents a complication in that the supposed reason for agreeing to the request is missing from the text. According to Rashi, the essence of Moshe's argument (i.e., that Hovav has witnessed the miracles in the desert) is conspicuously absent from the text.

I suggest that the phrase *ki 'al ken* implies an apology, accompanied by a reversal of roles. For example, Avraham invites his three guests into his home and adds, "*ki 'al ken* you have passed by [me]."<sup>31</sup> Even though Avraham is the one who, ostensibly, is doing an act of kindness for the travelers, he apologizes for troubling his guests to detour to his home. As such he reverses the roles, making it seem as if it is they who will be doing him a favor by accepting his hospitality. Similarly, Ya'akov sends gifts to Esav in advance of their meeting and requests that Esav accept his offering, adding "*ki 'al ken* I have seen your face as though the face of God, and hope you will be pleased with me."<sup>32</sup> It seems that Ya'akov is apologizing for troubling Esav with his gift, portraying himself as the beneficiary of Esav's kindness. The apology and role reversal are particularly striking in the incident involving Yehudah and Tamar.<sup>33</sup> Yehudah enters the scene accusing Tamar of impropriety, only to reverse his role from being accuser to accused, apologizing in the process. "She is more righteous than I, *ki 'al ken* I did not give her to Shelah my son."

Such an approach sheds new light on our text. When Moshe initially invited Hovav, he unwittingly insulted his father-in-law by making him feel like an outsider. Hovav rejected the invitation, clarifying that he wanted to be a part of, not apart from the people. Moshe accepted the gentle rebuke from his father-in-law and, in reformulating his offer, defined Hovav's status as a member of the nation and even granted him a portion in the land—but also recognized that this was no longer adequate. Had Moshe originally proposed to Hovav what he eventually did, had the slight regarding Hovav's status never been uttered, Moshe's renewed invitation would have sufficed. In reality Moshe did insult Hovav and, although he eventually acknowledged the truth in Hovav's critique, the damage was already done. In Hovav's eyes, as well as in the eyes of the people, the convert's status had been lessened.

To bolster Hovav's status within the nation, Moshe needs to apologize for the slight. He therefore adds "*ki 'al ken*"—an apology. "You can be for us a guide." We're offering you a position of prominence as our guide through the desert. Both Moshe and Hovav know that the Jews have no need for a guide through the desert. Moshe offers Hovav a place of honor within the camp as compensation for the honor lost as a result of the unintended indignity.<sup>34</sup> In addition, Moshe reverses his role with that of his father-in-law. Whereas in the initial invitation Hovav is portrayed as a recipi-

ent of favors from the people, Hovav is now being asked to do a favor for the people and accept a position of leadership. Moshe presented himself as wanting Hovav's participation even more than Hovav's wanting to be included as part of the nation.

In an ironic twist, Moshe's apology revolves around the phrase "you know our encampments in the desert," referring to the encampment of the Jews in the desert. The definition of those camps is in the beginning of the book of *Bemidbar*, and it is that very definition which lacks a clearly articulated place for the convert within the camp. Moshe may be apologizing not only for the unintended slight, but in effect saying, "You know as well as I that (in some way) you will always be outside of the camp, and about that there is nothing that can be done. Still, I apologize for my own insensitivity, request that you consider yourself part of this nation, and promise you a position of prominence."

## VI

In essence, Moshe informed his father-in-law that a serious attempt will be made to rectify the position of the convert in the eyes of the people, and that all *halakhically* acceptable methods will be enlisted in that endeavor. In addition, there will be a serious effort to be sensitive to the inevitable alienation sensed by and expressed to the *ger*. Still, by definition, the flexibility of *halakha* is limited by the rules inherent in it. At that point, it is the convert's responsibility and burden to accept that which cannot change.

Our text does not indicate whether or not Hovav accepted the apology and rejoined the nation.<sup>35</sup> More important, perhaps, is that once again, the life of the Jewish nation was enriched via the input of an outsider coming to join. And this time, Moshe did not wait for a Divine command before listening and learning.

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## NOTES

1. *Sefer ha-Kuzari* 1:95, ed. Even Shmuel (Tel Aviv, 1972), pp. 31-33.
2. *Teshuvot ha-Rambam*, ed. J. Blau, no. 293.
3. The classical commentaries discuss this point. In his comment on *Shmot* 18:1, Ibn Ezra (in the long commentary) suggests that Yitro returned to Midyan. Sforno on *Bemidbar* 10:31 posits that Yitro returned to Midyan but his children continued on with Moshe. Ramban on *Shmot* 18:1 suggests that Yitro returned to Midyan to bring his family, and eventually they all continued with Moshe.
4. It is perhaps for these reasons that Ibn Ezra (*Bemidbar* 10:29) felt compelled to suggest that Hovav is not Moshe's father-in-law, rather his brother-in-law. See also Ibn Ezra on *Shmot* 2:18. Ibn Ezra actually suggests that Hovav is Yitro, Moshe's brother-in-law. According to Ibn Ezra, Moshe's father-in-law is never identified by name (as he assumes

Re'uel is Tsipporah's grandfather). Nonetheless, Ibn Ezra agrees with most exegetes that the person described here is Yitro.

5. *Mekhilta* 18:1 discusses the meaning of each of Yitro's names, and the significance of additions to and deletions from names. It also cites the opinion that *kohen Midyan* means that he was a Midianite priest. *Zohar* on the same verse emphasizes the impact made on the idolatrous world when the high priest of idolatry (Yitro) recognized the supremacy of the God of Israel.
6. Significantly, they assign particular meanings to each of his seven names. See also the *Sifre* on our text.
7. See *Sifre*. Ibn Ezra (*Bemidbar* 10:29) and Rashi (*Shmot* 2:18) assume that Re'uel is Hovav's (or Yitro's) father. I would suggest the possibility that "ben Re'uel" is a description of his character rather than a description of his parentage—the friend of God. One example of this usage is the appellation "ben Beliya'al," which no one would reasonably suggest means that the person described had a father named Beliya'al. Regarding the description *hoten Moshe*, see *Mekhilta* on *Shmot* 18:1.
8. It should be noted that there is another possibility. Yehuda Shaviv, writing in *Bet Mikra*, Tishrei 5750, suggests that *ha-Midyani* is a description of *Re'uel*, not of Hovav. If so, the text would be indicating that Hovav himself was torn between being the one who loved Torah on the one hand, while maintaining his ties to his Midianite father on the other.
9. See R. Aharon Lichtenstein, "On Conversion," *Tradition* 23:2 (Winter 1988) for a more thorough discussion of these two aspects of conversion. See also *Sanhedrin* 94a, Rav's comment that one should be careful not to embarrass an Aramean in the presence of a *ger* for up to ten generations following his conversion, out of respect for the emotional ties the *ger* still has toward his former people.
10. Perhaps this is why the Torah must repeatedly state that the convert is to be considered like all other Jews. See, for example, *Vayikra* 22:18, *Bemidbar* 15:14-16. The Torah also establishes special *mizvot* protecting the convert. See, for example, *Dvarim* 10:19. Special compassion for and sensitivity toward the *ger* is a recurring theme in *Tanakh*—*Vayikra* 19:10, *Dvarim* 10:18, 24:17-21, *Yirmiyah* 7:6, 22:3, *Zekharyah* 7:10, *Yehezkel* 22:19, *Tehillim* 146:9. See also *Bava Metsia* 59b, Rabbi Eliezer ha-Gadol's statement that the Torah warns us thirty-six—and some say forty-six times to respect the *ger*.
11. This is the understanding presented by Rashi, following the approach adopted in the gemara, of the verses in *Bemidbar* 5:5-10. It has been noted that the Torah does not explicitly say that this deals with the convert. It still appears so, since the Torah is dealing with property stolen from one who has no relatives whatsoever. Assuming that the laws of inheritance spelled out later on in *Bemidbar* apply to earlier passages, it is not possible for a Jew to have no relatives, with the exception of a convert. See also R. Yosef Wanefsky in *Bet Yitzchak* 18 pp. 58-60, who suggests that this *parasha* is focused on the aspect of atonement in restoring a theft, and that the need for atonement is particularly acute in the case of *gezel ha-ger*.
12. Ramban on *Bemidbar* 5:6 notes this idea based on the concept of *semikhut ha-parashiyot*.
13. *Hukka ahat yihye lakhem la-ger ule'ezrah ha'arets*. *Bemidbar* 9:14. Ramban on this verse notes that even though the *ger* was already included in *Shmot* 12:48, there was a need to repeat the instruction in the desert, lest one think that only those *gerim* who actually participated in the exodus could participate in the *korban Pesah*.  
It is also instructive to note, as Rashi (*Bemidbar* 9:1) and others did, that this chapter chronologically precedes the rest of *Sefer Bemidbar*. Ramban (*Bemidbar* 9:1) adds that although the Torah may not be in chronological order, it is ordered conceptually. I would suggest that the placement of *Bemidbar* 10 is guided by the need to establish criteria for citizenship within the camp. It is precisely in that context that the Torah repeats the inclusion of the *ger*.
14. See previous note.
15. Hovav anticipated what the Torah states explicitly in *Bemidbar* 26—that the land was to be divided along tribal lines. Converts, being tribeless, have no stake in or claim to that land.

16. He did not simply decline the invitation, he outright rejected it when he said "*lo elekh*."
17. A contemporary echo of this idea is expressed by Abraham Carmel (a noted proselyte) who, in an intense personal note, writes:  

A proselyte, if he tries to live up to his calling, will re-live within his brief lifespan the discrimination, hostility and callous cynicism experienced down the ages by those whom he has chosen as his people. Most cruel of all, he will find much of his suffering within that very family from which he had hoped to draw strength and consolation.  
 Abraham Carmel, "My Chosen People," Tradition, loc. cit.
18. Ramban notes this point as follows: he knew . . . that he would not have a portion among them and therefore did not want (to go), so he responded that "I will go to my own land and my own *moledet*" because there I will have a portion.
19. S. D. Luzzato, in his comment to *Breshit* 12:1 s.v. *u-mimoladtekha*, also understands *moledet* as referring to national affiliation.
20. See *Sukkah* 49b.
21. Ruth 1:16. Boaz's comments to Ruth in 2:11-12 indicate that he, too, recognized the specifics of her commitments as reflecting an act of conversion.
22. Rambam, *Issurei Biah* 14:1. Rambam's omission of *erets* as part of the conversion process needs further investigation.
23. *Ha'amek Davar* on *Bemidbar* 22:20 s.v. *kum lekh ittam*. See also the comment of Kol Eliahu (attributed to the Vilna Gaon) on the beginning of *parashat Balak*.
24. *Bemidbar* 9:32.
25. *Sifre Beha'alotekha* 23 s.v. *ve-hayya ki telekh 'immanu*: What goodness did they do for him (Hovav)? When Yisrael were dividing up the land, they left the fertile area of Yerikho, 500 by 500 cubits, saying, "He who builds the *Bet ha-Mikdash* in his territory shall receive the fertile area of Yerikho (as compensation)." In the interim, the land was given to Yonadav ben Rekhav (a descendant of Yitro), who benefitted from it for four hundred forty years. . .
26. Ramban on *Bemidbar* 9:29. ". . . Moshe beseeched him (Hovav) to travel with them and told him generically, '*ve-hetavnu lakh*.' He (Hovav) thought that they were going to share with him the spoils of war—silver, gold, clothing, sheep and cattle, but would not receive a portion with them in the land, and therefor did not want (to join them). That is why he responded, 'I will go to *my erets* and *my moledet* (emphasis added), for there I have land, wealth and honor.' It was at that point that Moshe said to him, 'Please do not leave us . . . and from all the goodness God gives to us we will give you,' hinting that he will be given good land as payment for his efforts and the assistance he will provide in conquering the land. In my opinion, Hovav was appeased with this. . ."
27. The *leitwort* of that section, "*al pi ha-Shem*," is repeated seven times.
28. *Breshit* 18:5, 19:8, 33:10, 38:26, *Bemidbar* 14:43.
29. *Breshit* 18:5.
30. *Ibid.*, Rashi s.v. *ki 'al ken 'avartem 'al 'avdekhem*. In the continuation of his comment on this verse, Rashi maintains that the structure of his present explication of the enigmatic phrase be applied to all occurrences of the phrase in the Torah.
31. *Breshit* 18:5.
32. *Breshit* 33:10.
33. *Breshit* 38:26.
34. The last two verses in this section strengthen this point. At first glance it is difficult to understand the connection between them and the incident involving Moshe and Hovav. According to our thesis, those last two verses play a critical role, for they relate to us that, in fact, Hovav played no role whatsoever in guiding the Jews through the desert, rather, they were guided according to the original plan (of the ascending and descending cloud over the *Mishkan*).
35. Ramban and *Sifre* take it for granted that Hovav continued on with the Jewish people. According to the *Sifre*, Moshe's grant to Hovav and his descendants was a temporary one, the land reverting to Binyamin after the building of the *Bet ha-Mikdash*.