

Parshat Behaalotecha 5779

In this week's Parsha (10:29-32), Moshe asks Yisro, his father in law to accompany them on their journey to Eretz Yisrael. Yisro declines and says he will return home, despite Moshe's entreaties.

In this passage, Yisro is not referred to by that name but rather as "*Chovav son of Reuel the Midianite, father in law of Moshe*". This is not the only instance in which Yisro is referred to by a different name. In fact, Yisro had 7 names, each with a different significance as follows:

1. Yeser – through him, an additional parsha was added (namely Shemos, 18:21)
2. Yisro – when he did good deeds, an extra letter, a Vav, was added to his name Yeser, to make Yisro (see Mechilta Yisro 1:1)
3. Chovav – the Malbim, quoting the Ramban, explains this as a new name after his conversion to Judaism, while Mizrachi, quoting Chazal, explains it as describing his love for the Torah.
4. Chever – because he became a friend (Chaver) of Hashem
5. Reuel – from Re'ah L'Kel, friend of Hashem, because he converted to Judaism (Shemos Rabbah 1:32)
6. Putiel – because he stopped his idolatrous practices
7. Keni – either because he was a descendent of Kayin (Zohar 1:28b) or because he acquired (Kamah) heaven, earth and the Torah (Sifri Bamidbar 78)

There is a machlokes, though, whether some of these names apply to Yisro.

Rashi points out that in the phrase "*Chovav son of Reuel the Midianite, father in law of Moshe*", there are two possible interpretations – either Chovav or Reuel could be understood to be the father in law of Moshe. Rashi takes the view that Chovav was Moshe's father in law, and Reuel was Chovav's father. He notes, quoting Sifri, that while in Shemos 2:18, the daughters of Yisro come to "Reuel their father", it is quite common for children to refer to their grandfather as their father. Similarly, we see that Yaakov refers to "Elokei Avi Avraham" – the G-d of my father Avraham, despite the fact that Avraham was Yaakov's grandfather, not his father.

Sifsei Chachamim adds that it should not be surprising that both Yisro and his father were called Reuel. While his father's actual name was Reuel, Yisro was only called thus because of his actions, namely because he became a friend to Hashem (Re'ah L'Kel).

However the Tur Ha'Aruch brings a slightly different explanation – that Chovav was Moshe's brother in law (Tzipporah's brother), and that the Torah refers to both brothers-in-law and fathers-in-law using the same term "Chosein".

Yisro was not the only person in the Torah to have a large number of names. Moshe, too, had many names, some of them given by his various family members. His father Amram called him Chever, because for his sake Amram was reunited with Yocheved. His mother Yocheved called him Yekutiel, because Hashem restored him to her. His sister Miriam called him Yered, because she went down to the Nile to watch over him. His brother Aharon called him Avi-Zanoach, because their father Amram had left Yocheved (before they remarried). Kehos and his wet-nurse called him Avi-Socho since he was hidden from the Egyptians as if in a sukkah for 3 months. All of Bnei Yisrael referred to him as Shemayah ben Netanel because in his days Hashem heard Bnei Yisrael's cry and saved them (see Yalkut Shimoni, Shemos 166; other interpretations are brought in Vayikrah Rabbah 1:3). Moshe also had further names – Avigdor and Levy. And his most common name – Moshe – was given by Basya, Pharaoh's daughter due to her act of pulling him out of the water.

We see that while both Moshe and Yisro had many names, there is a difference. For most of Moshe's names, we know who gave him that name, and we are given an explanation of the basis for that name in how Moshe affected them. Despite this, the Torah only mentions one name, i.e. "Moshe", as a reward for Basya who called him thus after performing the lifesaving chessed of drawing him out of the Nile (Shemos Rabbah 1:26). Conversely, all seven of Yisro's names are mentioned throughout Tanach, and relate to his spiritual journey of growth towards Judaism.

Yisro's enthusiasm for spiritual growth and love of Torah are traits by which we can be inspired, and we all hope to be zoche to grow and fulfil the spiritual potential associated with our names, and increase our love of Torah, Mitzvos and Maasim Tovim.