

Moses' father-in-law makes another appearance in this parasha. In his previous appearance, he was known as Yitro. Here he goes by the name Hovav. We recall that shortly after the exodus, Yitro/Hovav (hereafter Hovav) travelled to the desert to meet up with Moses, bringing his wife and their two sons (Exod. 18:2-6). Their rendezvous is filled with joy, feasting, and a moment of mentorship in which he helped guide Moses in creating a judicial system. Afterwards, Moses sent him off, as it is written:

וַיִּשְׁלַח מֹשֶׁה אֶת חֲתָנוּ וַיֵּלֶךְ לוֹ אֶל אֶרְצוֹ. (שמות יח:כז)  
**Moses sent his father-in-law off, and he went home to his land.** (Exod. 18:27)

Reading that scene closely, we can make a plausible argument that their separation was in everybody's interest. Hovav's continued presence as "Senior Counsel to Moses" would have raised doubts among the people as to who was really in charge. And let us not forget that Hovav was a priest (or perhaps 'The' Priest) of Midian, a father to six other daughters, a grandfather to a growing clan, and most likely a person of substantial influence in his own right. Fast forward to the brief scene in our parasha. Hovav appears in the leadership circle of Moses. Moses entreats him to stay with the people that he could help scout the way for Israel through the desert to their intended destination:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לְחֻבָּב בֶּן רְעוּאֵל הַמִּדְיָנִי חֲתָן מֹשֶׁה נָסְעִים אֲנִי וְעַם הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אָמַר ה' אֵתוּ אִתָּנוּ לְכֶם לָקֵה אֶתְּנוּ וְהִטְבַּנוּ לָךְ כִּי ה' דָּבָר טוֹב עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל. וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו לֹא אֵלֶיךָ כִּי אִם אֶל אֶרְצִי וְאֶל מוֹלְדֹתַי אֵלַי. וַיֹּאמֶר אֵל נָא תַעֲזֹב אֶתְּנוּ כִּי עַל כֵּן יִדְעֶתָ חֲתָנְךָ בְּמִדְבָּר וְהָיִיתָ לָנוּ לְעֵינָיִם. וְהָיָה כִּי תֵלֵךְ עִמָּנוּ וְהָיָה הַטוֹב הַהוּא אֲשֶׁר יִיטִיב ה' עִמָּנוּ וְהִטְבַּנוּ לָךְ. (במדבר י:כט-לב)

**Moses said to Hovav son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law, "We are setting out for the place of which the LORD has said, 'I will give it to you.' Come with us and we will be generous with you; for the LORD has promised to be generous to Israel."**

**"I will not go," he replied to him, "but will return to my native land."**

**He said, "Please do not leave us, inasmuch as you know where we should camp in the wilderness and can be our eyes. So, if you come with us, we will extend to you the same bounty that the LORD grants us."** (Num. 10:29-32)

Then the text goes silent. Did Hovav stay with the people of Israel or go back to Midian? Commentators are divided on this question. Some say that Hovav did actually continue with Moses and Israel, because we have a report in the book of Judges (1:16) that, *The descendants of the Kenite, the father-in-law of Moses, went up with the Judahites from the City of Palms to the wilderness of Judah; and they went and settled among the people in the Negeb of Arad.* Others believe that the separation did in fact take place because it says so explicitly in Exodus 18 (cited above), and



that the two stories are part of a larger story, notwithstanding the fact that they appear separately. If we read the story closely, we can make a very strong, concurring case that Hovav did in fact return to Midian. The story has a text and a subtext. It is a story about Moses' relationship with his father-in-law but also about peoplehood and belonging. What are they actually saying to each other, and what are they actually hearing?

<b>Moses says:</b>	<b>וְנָסְעִים אֲנִי - We are traveling.</b>
<b>Hovav thinks:</b>	<i>Clearly, I am not part of this people. I may be Moses' father-in-law, but when Moses uses the word <b>וְנָסְעִים-we</b>, he is not including me. Where do I belong? Should I go with him? What will happen to me if I do? Will I become a full member of this people, or just a fellow traveler? Why doesn't he come right out and say to me: <b>Hovav, you are one of us now. We are on our way to our destination. Come with us. What will be my place among them on this journey, if I am not truly one of them?</b></i>
<b>Moses says:</b>	<b>אֶל הַמָּקוֹם - to the place.</b>
<b>Hovav thinks:</b>	<i>Why is he referring to it only as <b>the place</b> and not <b>the land</b>? What's the signal here? Ah, the land is not in the people's possession therefore it is technically just another <b>place</b>. Moses is downplaying the significance of their land because he knows that I have my own land.</i>
<b>Moses says:</b>	<b>אֵתוּ אִתָּנוּ לְכֶם - that God said (to Israel): that place I will give to you.</b>
<b>Hovav thinks:</b>	<i>Moses is asking me, an outsider, to come with <b>them</b>, God's people, to a generic place, not the specific land, that God promised them. God said, <b>I will give to you</b>. I'm not part of that promise.</i>
<b>Moses says:</b>	<b>וְהִטְבַּנוּ לָךְ אֲנִי - come with us.</b>
<b>Hovav thinks:</b>	<i>Again, he's referring to me as an outsider.</i>
<b>Moses says:</b>	<b>וְהִטְבַּנוּ לָךְ - and we will be generous to you.</b>
<b>Hovav thinks:</b>	<i>What does that mean? Is he offering me money? Objects? A parcel of the land that he doesn't have yet? Does he think he's going to buy me? I'm a person of honor. I'm his father-in-law. Why is he trying to make a deal with me? This is insulting.</i>
<b>Moses says:</b>	<b>כִּי ה' דָּבָר טוֹב עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל - for God has promised good-things for Israel.</b>

Hovav thinks:	<i>God has promised them <b>for Israel</b>. But what does God think of me? And what does Moses think of me?</i>
Hovav replies:	<b>לֹא אֵלֶיךָ</b> -No, I will not go.
Moses thinks:	<i>That's a pretty blunt answer. Starting with the word, no. He seems quite resolute about that.</i>
Hovav replies:	<b>אֵלַי מוֹלְדָתִי אֶלְדָּה</b> -for I will go to <b>my land and my birthplace</b> .
Moses thinks:	<i>This is coded language on his part. He says <b>land and birthplace</b> but not tribe and family. He is signaling to me that he sees himself belonging to the larger entity of land and ethnic group, rather than the smaller entities of tribe and clan. I understand that. He is a leader. He has responsibilities. Deep down he does not think he belongs to us, the people of Israel, because he does not share our history or our destiny. He has a different story from ours. But let me see if I can appeal to his emotion, to his expertise, to his ingenuity, to his sense of purpose.</i>
Moses says:	<b>אֲנִי נֹא תַעֲזֹב אֶתְּנוּ</b> -Please do not leave us.
Hovav thinks:	<i>He's pleading with me, but I've made up my mind already. I'm not abandoning him. I simply know that I don't belong with them.</i>
Moses says:	<b>כִּי עַל כֵּן יָדַעְתָּ תַּחֲנוּנוּ בַּמִּדְבָּר וְהָיִיתָ לָנוּ לְעֵינִים</b> -inasmuch as you know where we should camp in the wilderness and can be our eyes.
Hovav thinks:	<i>So, is this what it is all about? To be a scout? I guess he does not want me to remain with him as a family member. He wants me for my eyes. I would be a good scout for him. But this makes no sense. He's got God scouting for him! He's got the Ark of the Covenant leading the way! What does he need me for?</i>
Moses says:	<b>וְהָיָה כִּי תֵלֶךְ עִמָּנוּ וְהָיָה הַטּוֹב הַהוּא אֲשֶׁר יִיטֵב ה' עִמָּנוּ וְהִתְבָּרַךְ לְךָ</b> -So if you come with us, we will extend to you the same bounty that the LORD grants us.
Hovav thinks:	<i>Again with the offers. I have no intention of receiving any compensation. He keeps offering me rewards, but I hear between the lines - US. WE. YOU. It's clear that if I go with them I will always be the 'other'. I will never quite belong fully. Moses has not convinced me in this little exchange. He's a great leader, and he is attuned to God, but he has not managed to persuade me. I will never be an equal in this people. I hold by my decision. If I say anything more, it will not bode well. I will leave it here.</i>

And then the narrative breaks off.

Hovav, according to this reading, returns to his native land and that is why we do not hear from again. From here on the people will be guided by the Ark, by God, and not by a human scout.

So, what are we to make of this story? The people of Israel is in its infancy. Hovav, is related to Israel by the marriage of his daughter to Israel's leader, Moses, but Hovav is not an Israelite. He demonstrates solidarity with Israel, but he remains an outsider. Evidently, there is no real 'conversion' process for Hovav to join the people as an equal. Nevertheless, our reading demonstrates that Moses does not exactly warmly invite him to join Israel in the first place.

**When asked specifically to provide a service to Israel, to be a pair of eyes and serve as a scout, but not to share in its destiny, Hovav decides to remain apart.** He concludes that it would be better for everyone if he returned to his land and his people and demonstrate his solidarity from a distance.

The concept of peoplehood and belonging evolves in the Bible and in rabbinic Judaism. Ruth, whose story we read on Shavuot, leaps into solidarity with Israel by saying, **Your people are my people; your God is my God** (Ruth 1:16). As a Moabite, she was banned from ever joining the people (Deut. 23:3). And yet, here she is, marrying a Judahite and then becoming the ancestor of Israel's greatest king, King David (Ruth 4:13-22). In the book of Esther, we read about the Jews of Persia actively joining the Jewish people in solidarity as well (Esther 8:17).

As a Midianite, Hovav can trace his roots to Abraham: he is a descendant of Abraham and Keturah (Gen. 25:2). But he did not experience the exodus, or the splitting of the Red Sea. He did not stand at Sinai and remained effectively outside the story of Israel. And yet, by the time we get to Rabbinic Judaism, all those who join the Jewish people through the halakic process of conversion are regarded as children of Abraham and Sarah. They see themselves as having left Egypt, and as having stood at Sinai, and as sharing the covenant of Jewish history and Jewish destiny, equal to Jews who were born as Jews. But inasmuch as Hovav remained outside the people of Israel, he is also a model of an ally and an admirer. God blessed him then, and may God bless those like him, today. Shabbat Shalom.

**With the beginning of Operation Am KeLavi, we enter a new phase in Israel's historic attempt to thwart Iranian nuclear capability. May God protect Israel and the Jewish people around the world during these tense and epochal days. We continue to pray for the return of the hostages on this 617th day of their captivity. May God comfort the bereaved, protect the IDF, heal the wounded. Amen!**

**This parasha sheet is sponsored by Phil and Marsha Goldwasser in honor of Phil receiving his rabbinical ordination, and the 40th and 7th anniversaries of the Bat Mitzvahs of Marsha and Shayna, which both took place on Shabbat Beha'alotkha, June 14.**