

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Yisro

When Did Yisro Discover his Name was Yisro? Concept: The Way the Torah Quotes People's Words

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל מֹשֶׁה אֲנִי חֹתֶנְךָ יִתְרוֹ בָּא אֵלֶיךָ

*He said to Moshe, "I, your father-in-law Yisro, am coming to you."*¹

INTRODUCTION: WHO?

Our discussion this week opens by referring to a statement of the midrash,² cited by Rashi at the very beginning of the parsha.³ The midrash notes that Yisro actually had no less than seven names and provides the background to each one. Among these, the midrash says that he was called Yeser on account of the fact that he caused a section to be added to the Torah, namely, his recommendation to Moshe to appoint a network of judges so that he should not have to judge the people alone.⁴ Subsequently, when he converted to become part of the Jewish people, another letter was added to his name – becoming Yisro.

With this in mind, let us ask a very simple question: How could Yisro say "I, Yisro, am coming to join you"? After all, the events which led him to be given this name had not yet occurred – he had not yet added a section to the Torah, nor had he converted! And thus we ask, how did Yisro know at that stage that his name was Yisro?

Now, it is true that the Torah calls him Yisro already from the beginning of the parsha,⁵ however, that is a different matter. For the Torah will often refer to something by the way in which it would be called in the future, even if it was not known as such at the time. Thus, for example, in Parshas Lech Lecha,⁶ the Torah describes how the four kings waged war against the five "in the field of Amalek," even though Amalek,

1 Shemos 18:6.

2 Mechilta Parshas Yisro sec. 1.

3 Verse 1 s.v. Yisro.

4 See Verses 21-23.

5 Indeed, he is already referred to by this name in the opening verse of chapter three of Shemos.

6 Bereishis 14:7.

after whom those fields were named, had not yet been born.⁷ It is one thing for the Torah to use a term that would only come into use later in history than the events it is describing, because a) Hashem knows the future and b) at the time the Torah is written, these terms are already known and can be applied in retrospect. Yisro, by contrast, is speaking in “real time.” How then, could he call himself by a name that did not yet exist?

PEOPLE’S WORDS IN THE TORAH...

The key to answering this question lies in raising a more basic question still. Throughout the Torah, we read of things that various people said; some of them righteous personalities such as the Avos (Patriarchs) and Moshe Rabbeinu, others decidedly unrighteous, such as Esav, Lavan and Pharaoh. In these instances, we ask: Whose words are we reading, the Torah’s or those people’s?

On the one hand, the Torah has deemed it correct to include these words, such that if even one letter from any of these quotations would be missing from a Torah scroll, the entire thing would be disqualified. In this respect, they are an inseparable and indispensable part of the text and sanctity of the Torah. On the other hand, it is clear that not all of these words reflect the Torah’s message and viewpoint. Indeed, in some cases we know that they do not, as the Torah’s own presentation specifically contrasts with the one being quoted.

To illustrate with a simple example, when Pharaoh recounts his dream to Yosef, he states:

בְּחֶלְמֵי הַנְּנִי עָמַד עַל שְׂפַת הַיָּאֵר

*In my dream, behold, I was standing on **the banks of** the Nile.⁸*

Now, we happen to know that this is not exactly where Pharaoh dreamt he was standing, for the Torah itself prefaced by stating that Pharaoh dreamt he was standing: “עַל הַיָּאֵר – **over** the Nile!” Leaving aside the question of what lay behind Pharaoh’s adjustment of this detail within his dream, we see that his words do not match up with the Torah’s, and yet they are part of Torah! In other words, in this instance, the full measure of what the Torah wanted us to know about Pharaoh’s dream included both what it was he actually dreamt as well as what it was he said that he dreamt.

Needless to say, a willful departure from the truth is hardly surprising from someone like Pharaoh who has no loyalty to the truth, while the righteous individuals whom the Torah quotes will clearly be infinitely more aligned with its values and message. However, to the extent that it illustrates the point that the Torah quotes people’s words as their words, this principle is true for everyone who is quoted – it is their words being quoted, not the Torah’s.⁹

...AS QUOTED BY THE TORAH

However, the full understanding of the matter is somewhat more nuanced. For while it is true that the

⁷ Bereishis Rabbah 42:7, cited in Rashi to Bereishis ibid. for further instances of this idea see Kesubos 10b. Another very interesting example is that of Yehoshua whose name was changed by Moshe from Hoshea prior to being sent to spy out the land of Canaan, as related by the verse in the beginning of Parshas Shelach (Bamidbar 13:16). And yet, in the end of last week’s parsha, when the people are attacked by Amalek, the verse says, “Moshe said to Yehoshua, choose men for us.” (Shemos 17:9). Here, too, the Torah refers to him by a name that did not exist at the time, but that he would go by in the future (Maharsha, Sotah 34b, cf commentary of Rashbam to Bamidbar loc. cit.)

⁸ Bereishis 41:17.

⁹ See, regarding this, Gur Aryeh to Bereishis 42:2 and ibid. 43:20 and Torah Temimah ibid. 27:16. The topic of the Torah’s quotation of people’s words is discussed at length by R’ Yehuda Copperman zt”l in his sefer Pshuto Shel Mikra sec. 2 ch. 4.

Torah presents people's words, at the same time, it is the Torah presenting them. Every word in the Torah is written in a level which allows it to be expounded through the prisms of *pshat* (plain meaning), *drash* (hermeneutical exposition) *remez* (allusion) and *sod* (mystical meaning). It is unlikely that the Jewish people, when complaining to Moshe about the manna, instructing Aharon to make for them a Golden Calf or ailing in response to the spies' report about the land of Israel, crafted their words to be worthy of all these levels of interpretation – nor would they be capable of doing so even if they tried! Rather, as much as the Torah cites the essential content of their words when quoting them, the way in which it does so is in keeping with how the Torah "itself" expresses ideas. In this regard, the words the Torah chooses to present what someone said will be governed by the definitions of those words as they would reflect the Torah's own ideas.¹⁰

CHANA'S PRAYER

A classic illustration of this point can be found in a stunning comment of R' Yosef Chaim of Baghdad, the Ben Ish Chai. When Chana prays to Hashem for a child, she says, "אם ראה תראה בעני אמתך – *If You will see the suffering of Your maidservant.*"¹¹ The Talmud¹² records a dispute between the sages as to whether or not to expound the double expression "ראה תראה" as denoting two separate ideas. The Gemara explains that the opinion which does not expound anything extra from this double expression subscribes to the viewpoint that "דברה תורה כלשון בני אדם – *The Torah speaks in the way of people.*" In other words, in the same way that people will typically double over their words for emphasis, but not to denote another idea, so too the Torah speaks in this way and hence, the second word is not to be viewed as redundant that would require or warrant exposition.

The Ben Ish Chai¹³ asks a fascinating question. While there may be a dispute among the sages regarding whether **the Torah** speaks in the way of people, all agree that **people** speak in the way of people; and in this instance, it is a person talking! As such, why should any of the sages expound her words?

It is clear from here, says the Ben Ish Chai, that even when the Torah presents someone's words, it presents them in its format and with its parameters. For this reason, according to the view that the Torah does not double up its words "as people do", the verse would not have included a double expression within Chana's words – even if she herself had spoken in that way – unless it meant for it to be expounded. Hence, only the opinion who holds that "the Torah speaks as people do" maintains that the double expression is no cause for comment or exposition.

Coming back to our opening question, we can now understand how he is quoted in the Torah as referring to himself as Yisro, even though he did not yet know at that time that this would become his name. As surely as the Torah chooses to refer to him from this point with the name Yisro – "as per the future" – likewise, it presents his message to Moshe as calling himself by this name.¹⁴

10 The implications of this idea are that it should be possible to adduce proof regarding the definition of a certain word in the Torah from a verse where someone is quoted in the Torah, as indeed we find in numerous cases (see e.g. Berachos 34a based on Bereishis 37:10 regarding the definition of "*hishtachava'ah*", Bava Kama 65b based on Bereishis 31:38 regarding the word "*ayil*", *ibid.* 2b Based on Melachim I, 22:11 regarding the term "*yigach*" and Makkos 11a based on Bereishis 42:30 regarding the term "*dibbur*"). The converse side of this idea is that when we say regarding Nedarim (vows) that we follow the parameters of how people define the relevant terms – for which reason we do not generally adduce definitions for those terms from verses in the Torah – it would be equally inappropriate to cite verses in which quotes people based on the notion that these verses reflect how people speak. See concerning this, Tzofnas Pa'aneach, Hilchos Nedarim 2:8.

11 Shmuel I, 1:11.

12 Berachos 31b.

13 Commentary Ben Yehoyada to Berachos *ibid.*

14 See further, regarding the way the Torah quotes people, in Ramban to Bereishis 2:9 and Pardes Yosef, Parshas Bereishis sec. 29.