**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**From Slavery to Redemption**

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**Shiur 10:**

**Moses the Adult (2):**

**In Search of a Man (*Ish*)**

**Moses: In Search of a Man (*Ish*)**

And he saw an Egyptian *man* striking a Hebrew *man* from his brethren. And he turned this way and that and he saw that there was no *man*.[[1]](#footnote-1) (*Shemot* 2:11-12)

Moses, who was surrounded by women as an infant, seems to pay special attention to the men that he encounters as he moves toward adulthood. First, he exits the palace and sees an Egyptian *man*. He then spies a Hebrew *man*. Swiveling in different directions, Moses seems to desperately search the surroundings for something, or more precisely, *someone*. It turns out that Moses is looking for a *man*; this, of course, is a futile effort, for no man can be found.

In fact, like the word *yeled* (infant) in the previous section (2:1-10), the word *ish* appears in our section (2:11-22) seven times, rendering it a key word.[[2]](#footnote-2) Unlike the word *yeled*, which always appears with the definite article (*ha-yeled*, *the* infant), the word *ish* does not always appear with the definite article. More surprisingly, the word *ish* does not primarily portray Moses, but rather other men whom Moses encounters. Moses seems to be on the cusp of adulthood, almost but not quite a man himself.[[3]](#footnote-3) To become the sort of man that he would like to be – a man of integrity and decency – Moses goes in search of a man, of someone who can model the qualities he seeks.[[4]](#footnote-4) This section, then, should not be entitled, “Moses the Man” (like the previous section, “Moses the Infant”), but rather, “Moses: In Search of a Man.”

Moses will not find the man that he seeks in Egypt;[[5]](#footnote-5) he can spin around as much as he likes and all he will see is the absence of a person of virtue, the absence of a man. Instead, Moses encounters cowardly and corrupt men, men who disdain justice and openly mock Moses’s quest to become a man of morality: “Who appointed you the *man* to be officer and judge over us?” (Shemot 2:14)

The Hebrew man mocks the notion that Moses could be a worthy man – implying, moreover, that no one seeks a man of justice in Egypt. The search for a virtuous man fails miserably in Egypt. More to the point, Moses himself cannot become the sort of man that he wants to be in Egypt.

And so, Moses flees to Midian, where he rescues the seven girls from the wicked shepherds. In describing Moses’ act to their father, Re’uel’s daughters refer to Moses as an “Egyptian man.”[[6]](#footnote-6) They likely base this conclusion upon Moses’ appearance – his clothing or his haircut – but they have clearly misread his character. Moses, the man who doggedly pursues justice, is as far from a contemporary Egyptian man as one can be. Re’uel seems to understand this and, correcting his daughters’ misnomer, refers to Moses simply as “The Man (*ha-ish*).”

And they came to Re’uel their father, and he said, “How did you come home so swiftly today?” And they said, “An **Egyptian man** rescued us from the hands of the shepherds, and he also drew [water] for us and he watered the flocks.” And he said to his daughters, “Where is he? Why did you abandon **The Man**? Call him to eat bread!” (*Shemot* 2:18-20)

I have capitalized that reference to draw attention to the fact that this is the first time the word *ish* (man) appears with the definite article (*ha-ish*). We finally found **the** **man**, the principled man that Moses sought. It turns out that Moses himself is that Man; he has become the man that he seeks, a man of decency, a man who is willing to act courageously to defend his principles.

Still, Moses’ mission is not yet complete. Is he actually doomed to enter adulthood without finding a role model, a person of integrity? To our relief, Moses will meet a man. In fact, the word *ish* appears one final time in this narrative unit (again with the definite article), in reference to Re’uel, who welcomes Moses into his home (2:21).

Re’uel is deeply moved by Moses’ intervention; he responds immediately when his daughters excitedly describe the way that Moses saved them from the shepherds, expressing outrage at their failure to exhibit basic gratitude (“Where is he?! Why did you abandon the man?”).[[7]](#footnote-7) Re’uel relishes acts of justice and educates his daughters to appreciate these values as well. Once Moses meets Re’uel, he willingly makes his home with him (*Shemot* 2:21): “And Moses consented and settled with ***the******man***.” Far from the corruptions of Egypt, Moses has finally found “The Man," the exemplar that he sought.

**A Well Scene**

Moses’ arrival at the well, where he meets his wife-to-be, contains elements of the classic biblical betrothal type-scene, sharing features with the betrothal scenes of Isaac, Jacob, and later, Ruth.[[8]](#footnote-8) A *midrash* notes the matrimonial allusions that attend Moses’ arrival at a well, where couples in biblical stories tend to meet:

And he sat beside a well. [Moses] absorbed the ways of the fathers. Three met their spouses next to a well: Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. (*Shemot Rabba* 1:32)

The biblical betrothal scenes have more in common than the mere presence of a well. A confluence of circumstances shapes this type-scene, creating expectations for the reader who is familiar with the scenario.[[9]](#footnote-9) The protagonist (in this case, Moses) leaves his country (in this case, fleeing for his life). He arrives at a well, where he meets a young woman (strikingly, Moses meets *seven* young women), generally from his family (which of course is not true in the case of Tzippora, a Midianite). The travelling man draws water for the young woman (in this case, women) and is subsequently invited to her house for a meal. Following the meal, a betrothal takes place. In our story, Moses first settles in with the family, and then he promptly marries Tzippora, one of the young women at the well.

Looking beyond the similarities, the biblical reader familiar with the pattern is immediately drawn to the unique features of each scene, and especially those that diverge from the archetypical scene.[[10]](#footnote-10) These distinct features direct the reader to the distinctiveness of each scene, and particularly how this conveys the specific legacy that the protagonist of the betrothal story will pass on to the next generation. As with Jacob, whose well is occluded by a stone, something blocks access to the well in Moses’ betrothal scene; however, while Jacob faces an inanimate obstacle, Moses is forced to confront humans and their injustices. I do not wish to belabor the point, for we have discussed at length the significance of Moses’ courage and determination to fight injustice. I will simply reiterate the significance of the fact that Moses’ moral probity, his unhesitating zeal to save the oppressed, is a distinctive detail of his betrothal scene and the central feature of his legacy.[[11]](#footnote-11)

There are other unique elements in Moses’ betrothal scene. In other biblical betrothal stories, the marriage is to a girl who is a member of the protagonist’s broader family.[[12]](#footnote-12) Only Moses marries a complete outsider, a Midianite. Knowing Moses’ struggle with his dual identity and his subsequent refusal to accept membership solely based on ethnicity (as discussed previously), this does not particularly surprise us. Moses himself is an outsider, and willingly remains one to a degree even after becoming Israel’s leader, and thereby the consummate insider; for instance, he pitches his tent outside the camp (*Shemot* 33:7) and veils his face from the people (*Shemot* 34:35). Moses does not fear being an outsider; in fact, perhaps he rather relishes that role, which forges an inner strength that contributes to his ability to lead the people. Holding on to his status as an outsider offers Moses the dignity and distance to lead his often-disobedient nation.

After being (mis)identified at his betrothal scene as an Egyptian – a fact that he neither promotes nor denies – Moses marries a woman who is neither Hebrew nor Egyptian. By the time Moses arrives in Midian, he seems to have rejected membership in both family circles in which he was born, due to their corruptions. Instead, he prefers to search for a match in an unfamiliar family, one that reflects his values. He finds these norms in the person of Re’uel, whose quest for decency matches his own, thereby allowing Moses to easily enter his household.

Of particular significance is the way the meeting between Moses and the young women glosses over the persona of Tzippora, utterly downplaying her role. One only has to compare Tzippora’s introduction to that of Rebecca or Rachel to see how little attention Moses’ future wife receives. Tzippora is unnamed, one of seven daughters of a Midianite priest, receiving no individual mention until the moment that Moses marries her. One gets the impression that Moses does not deliberately marry Tzippora; any of the seven daughters will do, so long as he marries into the family of Re’uel.

By obscuring Tzippora’s presence at the well, the betrothal story foreshadows the alienation that appears to characterize the relationship between Moses and Tzippora. Following the enigmatic episode in which Tzippora circumcises her son (*Shemot* 4:24-26), Tzippora disappears for the duration of the Exodus narrative. It seems that she has returned to her father’s home in Midian, returning to Moses only when Yitro takes her with him to visit Moses at Sinai following the Exodus (*Shemot* 18:2, 5). According to some *midrashim*, Moses also separates from Tzippora later in the narrative.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Significantly, the fruit of their union does not perpetuate Moses’ legacy; the children of Moses and Tzippora fade silently out of the biblical story.[[14]](#footnote-14) Moses’ transmits his legacy horizontally, not vertically; he does not filter it through his children, but rather through God’s laws that he disseminates to his own generation, who will then transmit it to further generations (*Shemot* 18:16).[[15]](#footnote-15) This is accomplished with help from Yitro, who assists Moses in setting up a judicial infrastructure to administer justice.

It turns out, then, that Moses’ well scene links him not primarily to Tzippora, but to his father-in-law, with whom he builds a partnership that will enable him to transmit his legacy of justice.

**Re’uel: The Priest of Midian**

Moses’ father-in-law seems to be an admirable person. Nevertheless, some biblical interpreters question his worthiness due to his role as “priest (*kohen*) of Midian” (2:16) – presumably a place of idolatry. If Re’uel is an idolatrous priest, one wonders, why is he given such a pivotal role in Moses’ life?[[16]](#footnote-16)

Biblical interpreters have long struggled with this difficulty, offering different understandings of Re’uel’s role as *kohen*. For some, Re’uel may have once served as a priest to idols, but that occupation is in his past. A religious seeker, Re’uel rejected idolatry prior to Moses’ arrival in his home.[[17]](#footnote-17) Onkelos translates the word “*kohen*” as chieftain rather than priest, suggesting that Re’uel’s public role is political rather than religious. A felicitous, if bluntly apologetic, position claims that Re’uel’s priestly activity is devoted to God, not to a Midianite deity.[[18]](#footnote-18) Still, one cannot help but wonder whether Re’uel, whose household Moses joins for a lengthy but indeterminate period, is an active idolator.

Surprisingly, some *midrashim* explain Re’uel’s priestly role in its simplest sense, contending that Re’uel indeed worshipped idols and continued to do so even after Moses entered the household. One disquieting *midrash* depicts Yitro and Moses striking a deal in which Moses promises Yitro that his firstborn will be dedicated to serving Yitro’s idols.

When Moses said to Yitro, “Give me Tzippora your daughter as a wife,” Yitro said to him, “Accept this thing that I say to you, and I will give her to you as a wife.” [Moses] said to him: “What is it?” [Yitro] responded, “Your first son will be dedicated for idolatry. After that, [your sons] will be dedicated [to God].” [Moses] accepted [the conditions.] [Yitro] said to him, “Swear to me.” And he swore to him. (*Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael Yitro, Masekhta De-Amalek* 1)

This *midrash* presents a scathing portrait of Moses, Israel’s eventual exemplar of spirituality. Moses is not only willing to settle in the house of a known idolator, but he also agrees to devote his eldest child to idolatry. This *midrash* attempts to account for the absence of any mention of religious affiliation in Moses’ early life.[[19]](#footnote-19) *Shemot* 2 portrays Moses as a person of morality, who has not yet begun to seek God, but is instead focused on his search for a Man.

The name of Moses’ firstborn son can add further insight: “And he called his name Gershom, for he said, ‘I was a stranger (*ger*) in an alien land’ (2:22).” This name recalls the unjust acts of the shepherds (2: 17: *va-ye’garshum*), as well as Moses’ sense of abiding alienation. It is not clear to which land Moses refers. Does he feel a stranger *now*, in Midian? Or is he referencing the earlier events that caused him to depart Egypt in haste? Moses likely feels a general sense of alienation from a world filled with men who act with evil designs, decreeing indiscriminate death, beating helpless slaves, raising their hand to their fellow without cause, and expelling young girls from a well to steal their hard-earned water. This alienation is the very reason Moses settles so willingly with Re’uel, the first man who he can hold in high esteem. Moses is not looking for a religious role model, but for a moral one; for someone to alleviate his sense of aloneness, a partner in the battle against injustice.[[20]](#footnote-20) Meeting Re’uel brings Moses’ initial quest to a felicitous conclusion.

Moses’ passion for justice elicits God’s attention, indicating that Moses is a superb candidate to liberate his people. But first, Moses will experience the stirrings of spirituality. It is only once God appears to Moses in the burning bush that Moses begins his religious journey, a journey that will lead him to the heights of spiritual achievements, to a face-to-face encounter with the divine.

**Yitro and Moses: A Partnership of Justice**

Various biblical episodes incline toward a favorable portrait of Moses’ father-in-law. Re’uel’s interest in Moses seems to go beyond personal gratitude, stemming instead from Moses’ role as savior. The verb that describes Moses’ rescue (*hitzilanu*) links up to the later story of Yitro (in *Shemot* 18), who is either Re’uel or a member of Re’uel’s family. In that chapter, Yitro seeks out Moses at Mount Sinai, driven by the exhilaration produced by God’s rescue of Israel from Egypt:

And Yitro was overjoyed by all the good that God did for Israel, when He rescued [them] (*hitzilo*) from Egypt’s hand. And Yitro said, “Blessed is God who rescued (*hitzil*) you from the Egypt’s hand and from Pharaoh’s hand, who rescued (*hitzil*) the nation from under the hand of Egypt.” (*Shemot* 18:9-10).

Yitro appreciates God’s salvation of Israel from its oppressor. A *midrash* takes this a step further, depicting Yitro as a person unwilling to remain in a society that implements wicked policies:

Three were present at that counsel [where Pharaoh conspired against the Hebrew nation]: Baalam, Job, and Yitro. Balaam, who offered [evil] counsel, was killed. Job, who remained silent, was punished with suffering. Yitro,who fled, merited to have descendants who sat in the Chamber of Hewn Stone [in the Temple; i.e., they were members of the Sanhedrin]. (*Sota* 11a)[[21]](#footnote-21)

The above *midrash* seems designed to draw our attention to a parallel between Moses and Yitro.[[22]](#footnote-22) Two men flee Egypt. Both choose to leave behind a corrupt world. These men appreciate morality and justice and therefore delight in discovering each other. And so, a partnership springs into existence: Moses marries Re’uel’s daughter, linking their families, fortunes, and future. Moses will spend many years caring for Yitro’s sheep,[[23]](#footnote-23) and Yitro will visit Moses as he judges Israel, offering him advice that will lay the foundation for Israel’s judicial system (*Shemot* 18). Together, Moses and Yitro join forces in a shared quest for civility and justice. A *midrash* poignantly presents this idea in parable form:[[24]](#footnote-24)

The staff of God was planted in Yitro’s orchard, and no one could uproot it from its place. Only Moses [did so], and for this he was given Tzippora, [Yitro’s] daughter, for a wife. (*Midrash* cited by Abravanel, *Shemot* 2:11)

A tale that calls to mind Excalibur, the legendary sword of King Arthur (buried in a stone until the “true king” pulls it out), this *midrash* resonates with metaphoric meaning. I suggest that the staff in this *midrash* alludes to Yitro’s moral compass, which grows in his “orchard,” confined to Yitro’s immediate household. Moses’ arrival at Yitro’s house signifies the beginning of their shared path; Moses will eventually “uproot the staff of God,” from Yitro’s orchard, a metaphor for his ability to release Yitro’s ethical principles upon the world. Were it not for Moses, Yitro’s probity would not penetrate the outside world at all; his moral concept would remain trapped within the confines of his family.

The partnership between Moses and Yitro is founded on a mutual desire for a world in which justice prevails. Fittingly, these men join forces in Exodus 18 to set up the beginnings of Israel’s judiciary. When Yitro arrives at Sinai, he finds Moses acting as solitary judge of the nation, engaged in judgment morning and night. In response to Yitro’s concern, Moses explains his aims: “When they have a [dispute, they] come to me and I judge between personand **his friend**, and I inform them of the statutes of God and His instructions.” The word friend recalls Moses’ rebuke of the Hebrew in 2:13: “Why are you striking **your friend**?” Moses aspires to create a unified and harmonious society based upon civility and the bonds of friendship; the intensity of his work ethic stems from this singular goal.

Yitro sees that Moses may well collapse under the strain of ceaseless work, and so he advises Moses to share the burden with others and to choose worthy men to dispense justice along with him. Yitro envisages a stratified judicial infrastructure, where there are lower courts (officers appointed over larger groups) and higher courts (officers appointed over smaller groups);[[25]](#footnote-25) only the toughest cases rise to the supreme judge, Moses. Underlying Yitro’s wise advice are linguistic echoes of the corrupt Hebrew, who mocks Moses’ bid for decency in 2:14: “Who **appointed** you the **man** to be **officer** and **judge** over us?” To counter the generally uncivilized behavior of the Hebrews, born and bred in the maw of Egyptian corruption, Yitro directs Moses to find the men of good character within this nation: “**Men** of integrity (*anshei* *hayil*), fearers of God, **men** of truth (*anshei* *emet*), haters of profit.”[[26]](#footnote-26) As we saw, these types of men were nowhere to be found in Egypt, which fostered an environment of injustice. Yitro’s advice continues to evoke the words of the corrupt Hebrew (18:21-22): “And **appoint** these [men] over [Israel], **officers** of thousands, **officers** of hundreds, **officers** of fifties, **officers** of tens,” so that they will “**judge** the nation” at all times.

Yitro’s advice to Moses evokes the language of the corrupt Hebrew who struck his fellow Hebrew in Egypt.[[27]](#footnote-27) Israel must exit Egypt and its corrupt values, and design a new kind of society. Unlike Egyptian society, Israel’s society should promote decency and compassion, and to accomplish this, it must create a viable judicial infrastructure, which fosters goodwill between people. Yitro is a consummate partner for Moses. Together, these moral men lay the foundations of Israel’s judiciary infrastructure, designed to effectively convey God’s laws and construct a worthy society.

1. An almost identical phrase appears in *Yeshayahu* 59:16. Surveying a corrupt society, God sees that there is no man (*va-yar ki ein ish*); there is no one who cares enough to intervene to save society from corruption, and God has no recourse other than to rescue others Himself. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In addition, the word appears once in the plural (*anashim*). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The text offers no clue as to how old Moses is during these episodes. Various *midrashim* speculate about Moses’ age, some suggesting that he is twenty and others that he is forty (see, e.g., *Shemot Rabba* 1:27). My instinct tells me that the former is more likely, but evidently the biblical text does not deem this information necessary to understand the narrative. Moses will return to Egypt to confront Pharaoh only when he is eighty (*Shemot* 7:7). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The word man (*ish*) can connote a person of virtue and integrity (rather than simply indicating a person’s adult status), as in David’s instructions to Solomon at the end of his life: “Be strong and become a man (*ve-chazakta*, *ve-hayyita* *le-ish*)” (I *Melakhim* 2:2). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It is noteworthy that Moses has encountered *women* with courage and morality in Egypt, midwives, family members, even a daughter of Pharaoh. We have previously discussed this topic and the important role of the women in the Exodus story. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. There are many attempts to explain the nature of the relationship between the men called Re’uel and Yitro, both of whom are presented as the father-in-law of Moses. This topic is further complicated by other names attributed to various members of Moses’ in-law family, such as Yeter (*Shemot* 4:18) and Chovav, son of Re’uel (*Bamidbar* 10:29). Perhaps these names all refer to the same person (it is not necessarily unusual for people to have more than one name) or perhaps the text refers to different members of the family of Moses’ wife (e.g. father, grandfather, brother). The ease with which some Bible scholars regard this plethora of names as evidence for different literary sources strikes me as facile and not particularly compelling. For our purposes, I have chosen to blur between Re’uel and Yitro, figures who are both part of Tzippora’s family and represent the type of people with whom Moses wishes to be associated. While I recognize that it may be confusing, for precision’s sake, I will use the name (Re’uel or Yitro) as it appears in the specific verse or *midrash* that I am referencing. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Seforno, *Shemot* 2:20. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ruth and Boaz meet in his field, where the well is not explicitly mentioned, but its presence is implied by the verb that indicates water drawn from a well (*Rut* 2:9). For more on the way this betrothal scene unfolds in the book of Ruth, see Ziegler, Y., *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2015), pp. 271-282. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Alter, R., “Biblical Type-Scenes and the Uses of Convention,” *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic Books, 1981), pp. 47-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Alter points this out, illustrating how these stories both follow the conventional pattern and also introduce new elements, “for the specific needs of the hero under consideration.” (p. 58). While I am indebted to Alter for his enlightening analysis and original ideas, I have deviated from his analysis to offer my own understanding of the significant features of Moses’ betrothal scene. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Alter (p. 57) draws attention to a similar (but not identical) element of Moses’ betrothal scene: “He is faced not just with an obstacle but with enemies whom he has to drive off, not surprising for the killer of the Egyptian taskmaster, the future liberator of his people… [anticipating] his future role of *moshi’a*, national redeemer.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. On this point, Alter (p. 52) holds a different view, regarding the journey of the protagonist as a conscious movement from the narrow family circle to “discover a mate in the world outside.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See *Sifrei Bamidbar* 99, which maintains that the gossip spoken by Moses’ siblings relates to his having separated from Tzippora. This approach was adopted by many exegetes (e.g. Rashi, Ibn Ezra), ostensibly based on an overall sense that the marriage between Moses and Tzippora is rather unsuccessful. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Midrashim* often note this difficult aspect of Moses’ life. See, e.g., *Pesikta Zutrata* (*Lekach Tov*) *Shemot* 3:5 and *Bamidbar Rabba* 21:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Moses’ leadership is a one-generation phenomenon, as a *midrash* seems to note (*Shemot* Rabba 2:6): “Moses requested that priests and kings should come from him. God said, ‘Do not draw near,’” meaning that his descendants will receive neither priesthood nor kingship. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Shemot Rabba* 1:32 poses the question bluntly: “Does not God hate idolatry? How could He give Moses refuge inside the house of an idolator?” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Shemot Rabba* 1:32. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibn Ezra *Shemot* 2:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The *midrash* may also rest on the fact that Gershom’s name (unlike Eliezer’s) has no theophoric element. Moreover, the etymology of Gershom’s name describes Moses’ sense of alienation (*Shemot* 2:22; 18:3), rather than his connection to God (in contradistinction to the etymology of Eliezer’s name, provided in *Shemot* 18:4). The *midrash* moreover identifies the Levite idolator of Judges 18:7-13 as a descendant of this Gershom. This *midrash* is based on the striking linguistic connection between *Shemot* 2:21 and *Shoftim* 17:11, as well as the intimation of Gershom’s name in 17:7. In the view of this *midrash*, Moses’ descendants eventually stray from God due to his initial decision to live with the idolator. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Intriguingly, while the name Gershom recalls the misconduct of the shepherds, it also anticipates the word (*garesh*) that will describe Egypt expelling its slaves (*Shemot* 6:1, 11:1; 12:39). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. This is a ubiquitous *midrash*, cropping up frequently in Rabbinic literature. See, for example: *Sanhedrin* 106a; *Shemot Rabba* 1:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Another *midrash* (*Shemot Rabba* 1:32*; Midrash Tanchuma Yitro* 5) portrays Moses’ father-in-law as a Midianite priest who embarked on a quest for religious truth, seeking his true identity. Concluding that he no longer wants to serve idolatry, Re’uel became a pariah among Midianites. This *midrash* accounts for the peculiarity of the local shepherds mistreating the daughters of a Midianite priest, ostensibly a person of stature in the community. For our purposes, it further concretizes the parallel between Moses and his father-in-law, each of whom embarks on a quest for identity that leaves him alienated from his nation. This *midrash* may also lend new meaning to the etymology of Re’uel’s name: a friend of God, but lacking human friends, Re’uel is especially grateful to meet Moses. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. There is no way to determine the number of years that Moses spends in Midian, given that the text does not clarify how old Moses is when he emerges from the palace. It seems likely that he is a young man in *Shemot* 2, and he only returns to Egypt at the age of eighty (*Shemot* 7:7). Probably, Moses lives with Yitro for several decades of his life. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. I have brought the *midrash* as it is cited in Abravanel because I found his formulation succinct and conducive to illustrating the idea. The original *midrash* appears in *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* 40 and *Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot* 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See *Sanhedrin* 18a, which explains there are 600 minsters over thousands (*sarei* *alaphim*), 6,000 officers over hundreds (*sarei* *me’ot*), 12,000 officers over fifties (*sarei* *chamishim*) and 60,000 officers over tens (*sarei* *asarot*). Cassuto, Exodus, p. 220, explains that these are not numbers that indicate numerical exactitude, but rather various ranks of judges, as I have suggested above. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. There is a debate regarding whether the idea is that they hate ill-gained profit (e.g., *Targum Yerushalmi*; Rashbam) or that they are simply uninterested in profit (e.g. *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael*, Ibn Ezra), making them unsusceptible to monetary bribes. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. To be clear, I am not suggesting that Yitro somehow knows and cites the words of the contentious Hebrews from *Shemot* 2. It seems more likely that the Tanakh creates a deliberate linguistic parallel between these two incidents in order to draw our attention to Yitro’s role in helping Moses to construct a new society intent upon producing morality, unlike Egypt. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)