Who Was Re'uel? Finding a New Solution to an Age-Old Puzzle

By: YACOV BALSAM

I. Introduction

When we study Chumash with Rashi, we encounter a mystery with respect to the identity of Re'uel, the Midianite priest whose household Moshe joins. The problem is so blatant that practically every commentator takes a position on it. The commentators generally employ one of two approaches in addressing it. We shall see that each of these two approaches has weaknesses. (This is to be expected—otherwise, it is likely that a consensus would have developed around a single approach.)

As we review and analyze the mystery of Re'uel, our mode of study will be ***p'shuto shel mikra***. Emphasized by many great commentators among the *Rishonim* starting with Rashi, *p'shuto shel mikra* remains a thriving area of Torah study to this day. To the extent that we cite *midrashim*, we shall be citing statements that either are close to the *p'shuto shel mikra* or can give us insight into the *p'shuto shel mikra*.

II. A Framework for *P'shuto Shel Mikra*

We all have a general idea what *p'shuto shel mikra* is, but I'd like to set the stage for our study with a more specific framework. A literal translation of the phrase is "the plain meaning of the text." Nechama Leibowitz, one of the great popularizers of Tanach study in our day, is said to have quipped, when asked for the difference between *p'shat* and *drash*: "The explanation that *you* say is *drash*; what *I* say is *p'shat*." This quip, while intended humorously, reflects the reality that there is a good deal of subjectivity in deciding what constitutes *p'shuto shel mikra*. Still, having a clear definition to work with is important in or-

---

Yacov Balsam is an actuary at a New York-based insurance company. He received his BA at Yeshiva University, where he studied mathematics and classical languages. Among other interests, he enjoys the intensive study of Tanach and *Lashon HaKodesh*.

der to focus our analysis. Also, since different scholars define the term in somewhat different ways, it is necessary for us to state exactly what it will mean in this essay.

Here is a working definition: *P'shuto shel mikra* is the study of Tanach based on two guiding principles: the rules of *language* and the understanding of *context*.[1] Before returning to Re'uel, we will use the remainder of this section to explicate each of these two principles, and then to make some general points about the relationship of *p'shuto shel mikra* to other forms of Torah study.

A. Language—*Lashon HaKodesh*, like every language, has rules. These include not only basic grammar, but also more subtle rules relating to syntax, semantics, and other important areas of the language. These rules were well understood by our ancestors in Biblical times. After all, *Lashon HaKodesh* was their native language, which they imbibed with their mothers' milk. The writers of the books of *Nevi'im* and *Kesuvim* made full use of these subtle principles. Similarly, the books of the Torah, whose Divinely transmitted text is intended to be read and understood by human beings, make use of the same linguistic principles. This concept is reflected in an aphorism that frequently appears in *Chazal*: דברה תורה כלשון בני אדם—the Torah expresses itself in the language of human beings.[2]

---

1 This definition is based on our consideration of what features are common to the approaches of the great classic masters of *p'shuto shel mikra*: Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Ramban, Rashbam, Abarbanel, etc., as well as modern masters such as Malbim. These luminaries generally did not precisely define their methodology. Their view, probably correct, was that hundreds of examples are worth more pedagogically than a dry academic definition. It is also likely that they considered the definition to be obvious. Despite certain differences in their approaches, I believe there is substantial commonality in what they sought to do, and that the above definition captures this commonality.

2 See *Bavli Berachos* 31b and the many cross-references cited therein in the *Mesoras HaShas*. Even those sages (e.g., Rabbi Akiva) who dispute this principle do not take issue with its basic truth; rather, their point is that in a halachic context, we can make inferences and derive new laws from phrases which are redundant even if it is normal for people to express themselves in this same redundant fashion. The basic principle that the

When G-d gave us the Torah, He did not see fit to provide us with a user's manual for the rules of *Lashon HaKodesh*.[3] (After all, its recipients didn't need one!) Nearly all that we know today about the rules of *Lashon HaKodesh* is derived from a careful examination of the books of Tanach. Our ability to explain a linguistic element (word, phrase, or grammatical structure) in a particular place depends on the existence of this same element elsewhere in Tanach; for elements that appear several times, we can often tease out the meaning by comparison. However, Tanach is a relatively small body of texts—there are many words and expressions that appear only once in the entire corpus. These words or expressions generally present special difficulties for the commentator.[4] (Incidentally, there are certainly some words and ex-

---

Torah, at least on the level of *p'shat*, is written in the language of human beings, is a truism, accepted by all.

3 The *Torah Sheb'al Peh* can be viewed as a user's manual for understanding the language of the Torah on the level of *drash*, both halachic and aggadic. But books about the grammatical and linguistic rules (i.e., the *p'shat*-based rules) of *Lashon HaKodesh* did not begin to appear on the scene until medieval times.

4 This phenomenon has been identified and named both by the *Rishonim* and by academic scholars. *Rishonim*, notably Rashi and Ibn Ezra, refer to this phenomenon with phrases like אין לו דמיון במקרא (see Rashi on *Bereishis* 41:45 in reference to the unusual word פענח), or אין לו אח במקרא (see Ibn Ezra on *Vayikra* 1:15 in reference to the unusual word מלק). These expressions mean that the word or phrase has no parallel in Scripture; the underlying message is that it won't be easy to figure out what the word or phrase means, and that any suggestion for its meaning will be somewhat speculative (or in some cases may depend on an explicit tradition of the תורה שבעל פה, as for the word מלק). Academic scholars refer to this type of word or phrase (appearing just once in Tanach or in any other defined corpus) as a *hapax legomenon* (Greek for "stated once").

Incidentally, the intuitive fact that parallel uses of a similar word or phrase may be used to determine meaning is explicitly stated by an early Amoraic source: Rabbi Yochanan. He states: כל מילה דלא מחוורא מסמכין ליה מן אתרין סגין: any matter that is unclear, one clarifies it using multiple [parallel] sources (ירושלמי ברכות פרק ג הלכה ג; the same quote appears in *Yerushalmi Eiruvin*). I'd like to thank Heshey Zelcer for calling this reference to my attention.

pressions that were in the language in Biblical times but don't appear even *once* in Tanach, which means that the language that we today call Biblical Hebrew is only a subset of the language actually spoken by Jews in Biblical times.)

It follows that one of the key tools of the *pashtan* is the study of the language of Tanach, which essentially means the study of how each linguistic element is used in its various appearances in the Biblical corpus.

B. Context—The words of the Torah are not blissfully isolated. They are surrounded by many contexts: the context of the words around the one being studied, then the context of the surrounding *p'sukim*, the surrounding *parshios*, and even the context of other books of the Torah or Tanach. Very often concepts not well explained or understood in one place can be illuminated with information found in another place in Tanach. Such use of context is another key tool of the *pashtan*. It is more an art than a science—certainly, different reasonable people can draw different conclusions from context.

Context includes not only the internal context of Tanach itself (mentioned above), but external contexts that are studied by the scholar: historical context, geographical context, archeological context—the list goes on.[5] External (i.e., extra-Biblical) knowledge of topics related to Tanach can often illuminate the *p'shuto shel mikra*. It is well known that Ramban rejected a statement of Rashi about the meaning of the word *kivras ha'aretz* based on the fact that when he arrived in *Eretz Yisrael* he saw that it wasn't true.[6] This is one example among many. The potential for insights

---

5 It could be argued that our first guiding principle, the rules of language, is in essence one of these many contexts for understanding the Tanach: a linguistic context which represents the overall state of Biblical Hebrew, as found in the text of Tanach, and perhaps also in other related bodies such as epigraphic archeological finds or cognate Semitic languages. If we accept this argument, we could define *p'shuto shel mikra* using one guiding principle instead of two. The reason I have singled out the linguistic context as a principle of its own is that it is so central to the study of *p'shuto shel mikra* as to deserve separate recognition.

6 See Rashi and Ramban on *Bereishis* 35:16.

from external information is a particular blessing for us in modern times, when we have full access to *Eretz Yisrael* and to large numbers of archeological finds from the Biblical period.

In receiving a Divine Torah, the Jewish people understood that this Book of Books could be explained on many levels. One of these levels is *p'shuto shel mikra*. When an explanation of a text given in the vein of *p'shuto shel mikra* differs from explanations given using other levels of understanding, such as *drash*, *remez*, or *sod*, we do not view this as a contradiction or a problem, instead positing אלו ואלו דברי א-לוהים חיים—"both these and those are the words of the living G-d." In fact, it can be argued that *Chazal* expressed a certain preference for *p'shuto shel mikra* with their dictum אין מקרא יוצא מידי פשוטו—every text in Scripture can be understood on the level of *p'shat*.[7]

Two more important points: First, *p'shuto shel mikra*, as we have described it, is a methodology available to all. Not every statement of *Chazal* is *drash*; sometimes, even in aggadic passages, *Chazal* employ

---

[7] However, in the hands of *Chazal*, this dictum is more honored in the breach than in the observance. The vast majority of Rabbinic exegesis is midrashic, not *p'shuto shel mikra*. The *Rishonim* placed greater emphasis on this dictum.

It should be noted that *Chazal* level harsh criticisms at those who study certain Biblical books, such as *Shir HaShirim*, *kifshutan* (see, for example, *Bavli Sanhedrin* 101a . . . הקורא פסוק של שיר השירים ועושה אותו כמין זמר מביא רעה לעולם and Maharsha ad loc.). It is interesting to note that Rashi, at the beginning of the introduction to his commentary on *Shir HaShirim*, stresses that even though his commentary will, in part, address the allegory, אין מקרא יוצא מידי פשוטו. Here are Rashi's words:

אחת דבר א-להים שתים זו שמעתי, מקרא אחד יוצא לכמה טעמים וסוף דבר אין לך מקרא יוצא מידי פשוטו ומשמעו ואף על פי שדברו הנביאים דבריהם בדוגמא צריך ליישב הדוגמא על אופניה ועל סדרה כמו שהמקראות סדורים זה אחר זה.

Rashi is saying that even though the *Nevi'im* may speak allegorically, we still need to have a clear understanding of the subject of the allegory, which is a *p'shat* understanding. [For **allegory**, Rashi uses the common Talmudic word דוגמא, which derives from the Greek word **deigma** (example) from which we have the English word **paradigm**.] It appears likely that statements such as the above passage from *Bavli Sanhedrin* refer only to those who claim that the *p'shat* understanding of *Shir HaShirim* is all there is to it, not to those who study *p'shat* as an element of the text's meaning in the way that Rashi here describes.

the methods we have described and are essentially studying *p'shat*. To describe this case, Rashi often uses the expression אגדה המיישבת דברי המקרא דבר דבור על אופניו:[8] essentially, an aggadic passage that provides a simple explanation of the text ("places each part of the text in its proper place," i.e., shows how the parts fit together—note the emphasis on context in Rashi's phrase).

Second, as we have described it, *p'shuto shel mikra* need not be simple or simplistic. It can be as deep and complex as any other aspect of Torah. It is just a particular approach to Tanach study; an approach, moreover, that is highly accessible to us today.

III. Our Mystery

Let us now outline the case of Re'uel in full.

THE *SHEMOS* PASSAGE:

> וַיִּשְׁמַע פַּרְעֹה אֶת הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה וַיְבַקֵּשׁ לַהֲרֹג אֶת מֹשֶׁה וַיִּבְרַח מֹשֶׁה מִפְּנֵי פַרְעֹה וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּאֶרֶץ מִדְיָן וַיֵּשֶׁב עַל הַבְּאֵר: וּלְכֹהֵן מִדְיָן שֶׁבַע בָּנוֹת וַתָּבֹאנָה וַתִּדְלֶנָה וַתְּמַלֵּאנָה אֶת הָרְהָטִים לְהַשְׁקוֹת צֹאן אֲבִיהֶן: וַיָּבֹאוּ הָרֹעִים וַיְגָרְשׁוּם וַיָּקָם מֹשֶׁה וַיּוֹשִׁעָן וַיַּשְׁקְ אֶת צֹאנָם: וַתָּבֹאנָה אֶל רְעוּאֵל אֲבִיהֶן וַיֹּאמֶר מַדּוּעַ מְהַרְתֶּן בֹּא הַיּוֹם: וַתֹּאמַרְנָ אִישׁ מִצְרִי הִצִּילָנוּ מִיַּד הָרֹעִים וְגַם דָּלֹה דָלָה לָנוּ וַיַּשְׁקְ אֶת הַצֹּאן: וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל בְּנֹתָיו וְאַיּוֹ לָמָּה זֶּה עֲזַבְתֶּן אֶת הָאִישׁ קְרָאֶן לוֹ וְיֹאכַל לָחֶם: וַיּוֹאֶל מֹשֶׁה לָשֶׁבֶת אֶת הָאִישׁ וַיִּתֵּן אֶת צִפֹּרָה בִתּוֹ לְמֹשֶׁה: [שמות ב: טו-כא]

Young Moshe *Rabbeinu* has fled *Mitzrayim*, fearing that his justified killing of the *Mitzri* will lead to his own execution. Arriving at nearby Midian, he sits down at the well. Seven girls, the daughters of the Priest of Midian, are mistreated by the local shepherds, until Moshe helps them. The girls go home to their father **Re'uel**, who says, "Why didn't you invite him in?" The young noble makes a good impression, and is presented with **Re'uel**'s daughter Tzipporah as a wife.

---

8 See, for example, Rashi on *Bereishis* 3:8, as well as the similar phrase in Rashi's introduction to *Shir HaShirim* cited in the previous footnote.

This is clear and unambiguous enough: Re'uel is Moshe's father-in-law. Moshe has just married Re'uel's daughter Tzipporah.

Incidentally, the story continues in the next chapter, in which Moshe encounters G-d in the burning bush. In this chapter, the new name **Yisro** is used for Moshe's father-in-law: **וּמֹשֶׁה הָיָה רֹעֶה אֶת צֹאן יִתְרוֹ חֹתְנוֹ כֹּהֵן מִדְיָן** [שמות ג:א]. It may seem a bit mysterious that the name would change from one passage to the next (these passages are nearly consecutive in the Torah, with only three *p'sukim* intervening). Still, this isn't a contradiction—Yisro could have had two names, as did some other Biblical characters. In our discussion, we will refer to this second passage, which uses the name Yisro (and later, in *Shemos* 4:18, its variant Yeser) as the ***Shemos* Passage Continuation** (*Shemos* 3 and 4), in contrast to the above-cited passage from *Shemos* 2, which we will call the ***Shemos* Passage**.

THE *BAMIDBAR* PASSAGE:

> **וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לְחֹבָב בֶּן רְעוּאֵל הַמִּדְיָנִי חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה נֹסְעִים אֲנַחְנוּ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אָמַר יי אֹתוֹ אֶתֵּן לָכֶם לְכָה אִתָּנוּ וְהֵטַבְנוּ לָךְ כִּי יי דִּבֶּר טוֹב עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל: וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו לֹא אֵלֵךְ כִּי אִם אֶל אַרְצִי וְאֶל מוֹלַדְתִּי אֵלֵךְ: וַיֹּאמֶר אַל נָא תַּעֲזֹב אֹתָנוּ כִּי עַל כֵּן יָדַעְתָּ חֲנֹתֵנוּ בַּמִּדְבָּר וְהָיִיתָ לָּנוּ לְעֵינָיִם:** [במדבר י:כט-לא]

Yisro has a starring role in his own *parashah* (*Shemos* 18), which presents no special problems for our analysis. After that, Yisro makes no appearance in the Biblical text for a long while until the above brief citation appears in *Parashas Beha'alosecha*. However, the reference now is to "**Chovav** the son of **Re'uel** the Midianite Moshe's father-in-law." Moshe asks Chovav the son of Re'uel to join the Israelites on their trek into the unknown dangers of Eretz Canaan. Chovav refuses, perhaps preferring the comforts and safety of home. Who is Chovav? It seems clear that he is the son of Re'uel, Re'uel being Moshe's father-in-law as we know from the *Shemos* Passage. We do not yet face a contradiction.

Now something very interesting happens. *Chazal* have a principle of Torah study that when two passages are contradictory, often a

third passage can resolve the contradiction.[9] In our case, the opposite occurs. We have two innocuous passages, and now a third passage arrives and causes them to be contradictory. The third passage is in the *Nevi'im*—in the book of *Shoftim*.

THE *SHOFTIM* PASSAGE:

וְחֶבֶר הַקֵּינִי נִפְרָד מִקַּיִן מִבְּנֵי חֹבָב חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה [שופטים ד:יא]

We are told in the book of *Shoftim* of the battles fought under the leadership of Devorah and Barak. Key to their victory will be the heroic acts of a woman named Yael, the wife of Chever the Kainite. The *Navi* parenthetically provides some background on the distinguished *yichus* of this family—*mechutanim* of Moshe *Rabbeinu*—you can't get any better than that! In describing this connection, the *Navi* is unequivocal: Chovav is the father-in-law of Moshe.

Is this a problem? Not necessarily. We can reinterpret the *Bamidbar* Passage to say that it is Chovav who is חותן משה—the wording of the *Bamidbar* Passage is ambiguous on this point, and applying the words חותן משה to Chovav is arguably a simpler reading than applying it to Re'uel.[10] But we have seen in the *Bamidbar* Passage that Chovav

---

9 This is the last of Rabbi Yishmael's thirteen principles for halachic inferences from the Torah: וכן שני כתובים המכחישים זה את זה עד שיבוא הכתוב השלישי ויכריע ביניהם. This list appears in the introduction to the *Sifra*, and is well known from its prominent place in the Siddur. Incidentally, this principle, in essence, validates an appeal to the larger context in halachic analysis. This principle, one of many in halachic analysis, becomes the central, defining axiom of *p'shuto shel mikra* study, as we explained earlier.

10 It should be noted that the *ta'amei hamikra* on the *Bamidbar* Passage support this new reading that it is Chovav who is Moshe's father-in-law. (This makes sense, given that there is a *pasuk* in *Shoftim* which states this explicitly.) *Ta'amei hamikra*, or *trop*, besides providing musical tones, also serve as an extremely complete punctuation system. The syntax of a *pasuk* can be determined by the *trop*. The commentators generally (although by no means always) follow the parsing determined by the *trop* in their explanations.
Here is the passage with *trop*:
וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לְחֹבָב בֶּן־רְעוּאֵל הַמִּדְיָנִי֙ חֹתֵ֣ן מֹשֶׁ֔ה.
The first major syntactic break in this phrase, based both on grammatical logic and on the weights the system assigns to the various *te'amim*, is

is the son of Re'uel, and we've seen in the *Shemos* Passage that Re'uel is Moshe's father-in-law. Now we have a serious problem. **Is Re'uel Moshe's father-in-law, as stated in the *Shemos* Passage, or is Re'uel the father of Moshe's father-in-law Chovav, as follows from the combination of the *Bamidbar* and *Shoftim* Passages?** He can't be both, can he? Thus arises our mystery: **Who was Re'uel?—**a puzzle that has engaged untold generations of students of Tanach.

IV. Rashi's Approach

We have found two passages in the Torah which, based on their simple meaning, do not fit together. To reconcile them, it may be necessary to do some squeezing. Rashi does the squeezing in the *Shemos* Passage. Remember what it said: וַתָּבֹאנָה אֶל רְעוּאֵל אֲבִיהֶן—the girls went to Re'uel their father. But we know from elsewhere (the *Bamidbar* Passage as illuminated by the *Shoftim* Passage) that Moshe's father-in-law was in fact the **son** of Re'uel. **In Rashi's approach, Re'uel was not Tzipporah's father; he was her grandfather.**

To quote Rashi (*Bamidbar* 10:29)[11]:

> חובב - הוא יתרו, שנאמר (שופטים ד, יא) מבני חובב חותן משה, ומה תלמוד לומר (שמות ב, יח) ותבאנה אל רעואל אביהן, מלמד שהתינוקות קורין לאבי אביהן אבא.

In Rashi's words, התינוקות קורין לאבי אביהן אבא—small children call their grandfather "Abba," so we understand why the *pasuk* says that the girls went to Re'uel "their father" even though he was actu-

---

after the word *Moshe*, whose *ta'am* is a *reviyi*. To indicate that Re'uel is *Chosein Moshe*, one would put a *ta'am* for the next major syntactic break on the word *leChovav*. (This would be similar to punctuating in English: "to Chovav, the son of Re'uel the Midianite the father-in-law of Moshe.") Alternatively, to indicate that Chovav is *Chosein Moshe*, one would put a *ta'am* for the next major syntactic break on the word *haMidyani*. (This would be similar to punctuating in English: "to Chovav the son of Re'uel the Midianite, the father-in-law of Moshe.") Since the *zarka* (on *haMidyani*) determines a stronger break than the *telisha gedolah* (on *leChovav*), the *trop* imply that the description *Chosein Moshe* applies to Chovav, not to Re'uel.

11 A similar statement appears in Rashi at the beginning of *Parashas Yisro*.

ally their grandfather. Perhaps their father Yisro / Chovav was incapacitated or wasn't home at the time. For whatever reason, they went home to their grandfather Re'uel, who asked them to invite Moshe over. In contrast, the *Shemos* Passage Continuation, as well as the *Bamidbar* Passage, refers to Moshe's father-in-law Yisro / Yeser / Chovav. Thus the contradiction is resolved.

For convenience, we have referred to this as Rashi's approach, since that's likely to be where most of us have seen it. But it actually long predates Rashi. Rashi is quoting verbatim the words of *Chazal* in the *Sifre,*[12] as is his custom when he finds a midrash that has the flavor of *p'shuto shel mikra*. Other commentators that employ this same approach to explain our contradiction include Ramban and Abarbanel, as well as the great nineteenth-century Italian poet and *pashtan* Shmuel David Luzzato.[13]

Is it *P'shuto Shel Mikra*?

We shall now take some time to identify weaknesses in Rashi's (i.e., the *Sifre*'s) approach when viewed through the lens of *p'shuto shel mikra*.

Allow me to start with an important note. In referring to weaknesses, I'm not (*chas veshalom*) criticizing or rejecting anything that Rashi (or *Chazal*) said. I am simply saying that the interpretation does not fit well with my understanding of *p'shuto shel mikra*. The interpretation surely has other depths known to Rashi (or *Chazal*), and it is likely that further analysis would identify these depths, but it is not the purpose of this essay to do this type of analysis—only to study the level of interpretation known as *p'shuto shel mikra*.

Rashi's interpretation has abundant weaknesses when evaluated against our criteria for *p'shuto shel mikra*. First, it requires an understanding of the **language** that is rare and nonstandard. Normally, the word אב does not mean grandfather. It is certainly a possibility: in *Lashon HaKodesh*, especially in poetic usage, אב may mean an ancestor or progenitor, and it would be easy to give a few examples in Tanach where this is the case (וְיִקָּרֵא בָהֶם שְׁמִי וְשֵׁם אֲבֹתַי אַבְרָהָם וְיִצְחָק), as stated

12 *Sifre Beha'alosecha* ad loc.

13 Usually known as Shadal. His great-grandfather was, incidentally, a brother of Rav Moshe Chaim Luzzato (Ramchal).

by Yaakov *Avinu*, is a well-known example.[14]) But in the *Shemos* Passage, it is a forced reading. Why not just explicitly say that Re'uel is their grandfather, in particular since the girls' father Yisro will also be part of the story? Is the Torah trying to confuse us?[15] In any case, the fact that little girls may call their grandfather אבא does not seem especially relevant, since the phrase וַתָּבֹאנָה אֶל רְעוּאֵל אֲבִיהֶן is not a direct quote of the girls' speech.

Second, let us address the weaknesses with regard to **context**, which are arguably even deeper. Rashi's explanation appears to address a single phrase in isolation: וַתָּבֹאנָה אֶל רְעוּאֵל אֲבִיהֶן. But the passage continues. With no change of grammatical subject, the passage now says:

> וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל בְּנֹתָיו וְאַיּוֹ לָמָּה זֶּה עֲזַבְתֶּן אֶת הָאִישׁ קְרָאֶן לוֹ וְיֹאכַל לָחֶם: וַיּוֹאֶל מֹשֶׁה לָשֶׁבֶת אֶת הָאִישׁ וַיִּתֵּן אֶת צִפֹּרָה בִּתּוֹ לְמֹשֶׁה:

It doesn't say he talked to his granddaughters and then gave his granddaughter to Moshe. It refers to his daughters. Also, even if Yisro the father had been away on business on this one occasion, why would the grandfather Re'uel give away Yisro's daughter—isn't that Yisro's paternal right? In fact, the *Sifre*'s interpretation does not, on the surface, solve the problem it set out to solve, that of clarifying the *Shemos* Passage. I can envision two alternative approaches to understand how the *Sifre* interprets this passage. One approach is to say that just as small girls call their grandfather אבא, the girls also may be referred to as the daughters of the grandfather. However, if *Chazal* had intended this meaning, it is likely that they wouldn't have limited their focus to how small children speak. They would have said

---

14 *Bereishis* 48:16.

15 The word סָב (or סַבָּא) for grandfather is not Biblical. In fact, this word, even when appearing in *Lashon Chazal*, does not mean "grandfather", but "old man" (similar to *zaken*); the meaning "grandfather" arose in relatively modern times. Therefore, this word would certainly not have been an option in our *pasuk* as a replacement for אָב. However, we see that in the story of Yaakov's journey to the household of his grandfather Besu'el (*Bereishis* 28:2), the concept of grandfather is expressed perfectly clearly and explicitly: קוּם לֵךְ פַּדָּנָה אֲרָם בֵּיתָה בְתוּאֵל אֲבִי אִמֶּךָ. A similar expression could surely have been used in our passage.

"Grandfathers can be called אב, and granddaughters can be called בת in *Lashon HaKodesh*" (which, incidentally, is probably a true statement).

A second approach which is, in my opinion, more likely, is that underlying this statement of *Chazal* is the assumption that there is a change of subject in the passage. The second part of the passage (quoted just above) is not referring to Re'uel the grandfather, but to Yisro the father, who is the one who gives away his daughter to Moshe. (Note that no name is given in the second part, so this change of subject is logically tenable.) Needless to say, such an unannounced change of grammatical subject to a character not previously mentioned is not characteristic of *p'shuto shel mikra*.

Whichever of the above understandings of this *Sifre* we accept, its explanation appears to diverge from our criteria for *p'shuto shel mikra* both with respect to language (the unusual meaning of the words אב and בת) and with respect to context (in the first understanding, the difficulty of assuming that the grandfather gives away his granddaughter; in the second understanding, the difficulty of the unannounced change of subject). *P'shuto shel mikra* should adhere far more strongly to both language and context than does Rashi's (and the *Sifre*'s) interpretation.

V. Ibn Ezra's Approach

Ibn Ezra was a radical *pashtan*. Possessing an uncanny genius when it came to *Lashon HaKodesh* and Biblical style, he let this genius take him where it would, and frequently came up with new insights that were strikingly different from the traditional interpretations unanimously held by *Chazal* and by his contemporaries. It is not always easy to study Ibn Ezra, since brevity is at the heart of his style. He generally doesn't take a lot of time to explain himself, assuming that his reader grasps his motivations.

In our case, Ibn Ezra takes issue with the interpretation of Rashi and the *Sifre*. One would assume that contributing to his uneasiness with this traditional interpretation were the difficulties we noted above in the *p'shat* understanding of the *Shemos* Passage according to Rashi.

Where we saw earlier that Rashi "squeezed" the interpretation of the *Shemos* Passage, Ibn Ezra accepts a simple reading of it. Re'uel is Moshe's father-in-law, just as we thought originally. What about the

other passages? What about Chovav the son of Re'uel? As we noted before, something may have to give when two passages don't fit together. Ibn Ezra does a bit of squeezing in the *Bamidbar* Passage, specifically with respect to the word חותן which is featured in it. **In Ibn Ezra's approach, since Re'uel is Moshe's father-in-law, his son Chovav is Moshe's brother-in-law.** But the *Bamidbar* Passage, read in conjunction with the *Shoftim* Passage, show us unequivocally that חובב is חותן משה. No problem—**the word חותן (*chosein*) can mean brother-in-law** (in the sense of one's wife's brother). At least, so Ibn Ezra tells us. Contradiction resolved.

Ibn Ezra's suggestion is plausible in many ways. There seemingly is no other single word in Biblical Hebrew for this kind of brother-in-law (one's wife's brother).[16] Maybe ***chosein***, a word which is very familiar to us as meaning father-in-law, really means literally "the one who contracts a marriage," and could appropriately be applied to other members of the wife's family besides the father-in-law, such as the brother-in-law.

Let's take Ibn Ezra's suggestion at face value and consider its consequences. Besides the *Bamidbar* Passage, the expression חותן משה also appears in the beginning of *Parashas Yisro*, in reference to Yisro.[17] If in the context of the Torah's account of Moshe's family, the expression חותן משה is used to refer to Moshe's **brother-in-law** (as stated by Ibn Ezra), then it is plausible that not only is Chovav Moshe's brother-in-law—so is Yisro. Yisro is, in fact, the same person as Chovav.

In fact, Ibn Ezra says all this, in his ultra-concise way, in his comment on *Bamidbar* 10:29:

> והנה חובב הוא בן רעואל והנה הוא אחי צפורה. ולפי שיקול הדעת שהוא יתרו, בעבור חנותנו במדבר (במדבר י, לא) ואמר על דבר יתרו כאשר בא אל המדבר אשר הוא חונה שם (שמות יח, ה)

---

16 יָבָם, it appears, refers only to another kind of brother-in-law, a woman's husband's brother. The word גִּיס, which appears in the Mishnah and does include in its meaning one's wife's brother, is not Biblical, and in fact is derived from the Aramaic גִּיסָא side, this relationship being a lateral one.

17 The same is true in the *Shemos* Passage Continuation, in which Yisro is referred to as חותנו.

He states that Chovav and Yisro are both names for Moshe's brother-in-law. Then he finds in the *Bamidbar* Passage a proof (from context) that this is the case. (He leaves unstated the proof from the fact that the parallel expression חותן משה is used to describe both people, this being too obvious to mention.) The proof he adduces is that *Bamidbar* 10:31 refers to Chovav's special knowledge of the camp of *Bnei Yisrael*. Yisro is the one who has been mentioned as having appeared in this camp, in *Parashas Yisro*. There is no mention of a different person named Chovav having accompanied Yisro at that time. Therefore it is more plausible to assume that Yisro / Chovav is the son of Re'uel, as compared with the logical alternative that Chovav is the son of Re'uel / Yisro.

We are accustomed to finding almost unlimited depths to plumb in the commentary of Rashi. The same can be said about Ibn Ezra. In this case, Ibn Ezra leaves unstated an important exegetical benefit that follows from his analysis. We are missing (at least in the Biblical text) a large segment of Moshe's life. Moshe leaves *Mitzrayim* seemingly a young man.[18] He has just grown up, "gone out," and seen the afflictions of his brothers, and has done the vigorous act of killing the

---

[18] No age is stated in the Chumash for Moshe at the time of his first exodus. A number of different ages are proposed by various *midrashim*, which suggests that there was not a received tradition on this point. One age that is well represented in the *midrashim* (and may in fact be the highest age represented) is forty—see, for example, the *Sifre* on *Devarim* 34:7, which focuses on the symmetry of Moshe's life: forty years in *Mitzrayim*, forty years in Midian, and forty years in the *midbar*, with a similar analysis done for other famous people such as Rabbi Akiva who, the *Sifre* tells us, lived 120 years.

Note also Ramban on *Shemos* 2:23, who suggests in the *p'shuto shel mikra* that Moshe was between twelve and twenty years old at the time of this first exodus.

As an interesting aside, the *Sifre*'s assumption that Moshe fled *Mitzrayim* at age forty is also found in a source from outside our tradition, namely the Christian Bible (Book of Acts, Chapter 7). The Book of Acts was written in the late first century or early second century CE, and is therefore roughly contemporaneous with Rabbi Akiva, with whose school the *Sifre* is associated. The presence of the "age forty" tradition in this Christian book appears to indicate that this tradition was widespread and well accepted in this relatively early era, to the point that the authors of the Christian Bible were aware of it.

Mitzri. Next, he journeys to Midian and marries Tzipporah. In the very next scene, Moshe has his encounter with G-d at the burning bush, and soon returns to *Mitzrayim*, where we are told that he is eighty years old. What has happened to the intervening years?[19]

It is reasonable to suggest that Moshe was relatively young when he got married, and that he spent many years in Midian before the burning bush theophany. If this is the case, then it is plausible that he married Re'uel's daughter Tzipporah relatively early in his life, and that Re'uel passed away in the many years that intervened between the *Shemos* Passage and the *Shemos* Passage Continuation (i.e., between *Shemos* 2 and *Shemos* 3). In this view, starting with *Shemos* 3 we are dealing with Re'uel's son Yisro, now the patriarch of the family after Re'uel's passing.

It happens that there is a strong hint in the *p'shuto shel mikra* that a sizable amount of time has passed between these two passages. In fact, it's quite explicit. In the short passage that bridges the *Shemos* Passage (involving Re'uel) and the *Shemos* Passage Continuation (involving Yisro) the following three *p'sukim* appear:

> וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הָרַבִּים הָהֵם וַיָּמָת מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם וַיֵּאָנְחוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן הָעֲבֹדָה וַיִּזְעָקוּ וַתַּעַל שַׁוְעָתָם אֶל הָאֱ-לֹהִים מִן הָעֲבֹדָה: וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱ-לֹהִים אֶת נַאֲקָתָם וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱ-לֹהִים אֶת בְּרִיתוֹ אֶת אַבְרָהָם אֶת יִצְחָק וְאֶת יַעֲקֹב: וַיַּרְא אֱ-לֹהִים אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֵּדַע אֱ-לֹהִים: [שמות ב:כג-כה]

Use of the word הָרַבִּים at the beginning of this passage suggests that we are being told, in this brief transitional reference, that many years have passed. In this period of time, according to Ibn Ezra, a generational shift has occurred. Re'uel passed on, and his son Yisro /

---

19 The midrash characteristically fleshes out some of this missing time in Moshe's life with stories about how he became the king of Kush and fought great wars (see, for example, *Yalkut Shim'oni* 168). Apparently this theme in the midrash is connected with the mysterious reference in *Parashas Beha'alosecha* (*Bamidbar* 12:1) to a Kushite woman that Moshe had married. While some *midrashim* (which are followed by Rashi in *Beha'alosecha*) view this as an oblique reference to Tzipporah even though Kush is not the same place as Midian, other *midrashim* take it literally and assume that Moshe was in Kush at some earlier point in his life and found a wife there.

Chovav, Moshe's brother-in-law, became the head of the household. All references in the Torah from this point on are to Yisro / Chovav, Moshe's brother-in-law.[20]

Is it *P'shuto Shel Mikra*?

I would venture to suggest that Ibn Ezra's explanation is closer to the *p'shuto shel mikra* than Rashi's. (This makes sense, given that Rashi is presenting the standard explanation given by *Chazal*, while Ibn Ezra is inventing his own approach.) When considered as *p'shat*, the problems with Rashi's explanation of the *Shemos* Passage are many and varied, as we noted earlier.

But considered on the level of *p'shat*, Ibn Ezra's explanation is also not without problems. First, let's consider **language**. Can the word ***chosein*** mean brother-in-law? We have no evidence that it can.[21] Most of the appearances of the word in Tanach refer to Yisro / Chovav, so they can't be used as evidence. The word also appears

---

20 Note that the *Bamidbar* Passage (about Chovav) takes place during approximately the same time period as the *Shemos* Passage Continuation (about Yisro / Yeser); the *Bamidbar* passage takes place only in the second year after *Yetzias Mitzrayim*, while the *Shemos* Passage Continuation, which includes the burning bush episode, precedes *Yetzias Mitzrayim* by only a relatively brief interval. This, too, makes it likely that Yisro and Chovav are the same person, son of Moshe's father-in-law Re'uel. The same logic makes it correspondingly unlikely that Re'uel and Yisro are the same person, Moshe's father-in-law, while Chovav is Moshe's brother-in-law. I am not aware of any commentator that suggests this second possibility; its unpopularity is probably due to a combination of the Ibn Ezra's proof from Chovav's knowledge of the camp, and the chronology-based reason that we have just outlined.

21 The Ibn Ezra on *Bamidbar* 10:29 appears to cite *Bamidbar* 10:29 as evidence that the word *chosein* **can** mean brother-in-law:

דרך המקרא לקרוא אבי הנערה ואחיה חותן, **והעד**: לחובב בן רעואל המדיני חותן משה, וכבר נתברר שחובב אחי צפורה, וקראו חותן משה.

But this is not actually evidence of a new meaning for ***chosein***. To have such evidence, we would need to find a use of the word ***chosein*** which unambiguously has this new meaning in a different passage, not in the very passage that is in dispute. It is not clear to me what Ibn Ezra intends to prove by this seemingly circular citation.

three times in the story of *Pilegesh Begiv'ah* (*Shoftim* 19), and there it is clear that it has its standard meaning of father-in-law. Also, in the *kelalos* that we find in *Parashas Ki Savo*, we have the word in female form (***chosenes***): אָרוּר שֹׁכֵב עִם חֹתֶנְתּוֹ—and again our tradition attributes to it only the standard meaning of mother-in-law.[22] Finally, there is a strong logical argument that ***chosein*** and ***chosenes*** ("contractors") should refer specifically to the parties that normally contract the marriage with the groom / son-in-law, who is referred to as the ***chasan***. These parties are the father-in-law and mother-in-law only.

Second, let's consider **context**. According to Ibn Ezra's reading, Yisro (Moshe's brother-in-law), who becomes a major, important character in the Torah, is never introduced to us. He just appears suddenly in *Shemos* 3 after Re'uel, Moshe's father-in-law, has died, again without notice.[23] Also, in both *Shemos* 2 and *Shemos* 3, the person under discussion (Re'uel or Yisro) is referred to as *Kohein Midian*, which subtly suggests, contrary to Ibn Ezra, that we are dealing with the same person. All of these facts are contextual difficulties with Ibn Ezra's explanation.

Ibn Ezra's explanation also must face the fact that our tradition unanimously makes Yisro Moshe's father-in-law, not his brother-in-law. This tradition has cogent logic behind it: would Moshe be more likely to take crucial advice from an older man with long experience behind him, or from a (perhaps younger) contemporary? Continuing to assume that Yisro, whom Moshe (as well as the Torah) treats with such respect, is Moshe's father-in-law thus has another strong contextual argument in its favor.

VI. Can the Contradictories be Reconciled? A New Approach

What Rashi's and Ibn Ezra's approaches to our contradiction have in common is that, as we have seen, each reinterprets one side of the

---

22 In fact, this *kelalah* probably could **not** be read to refer to a sister-in-law even if we wanted to, since it is permissible halachically to marry one's sister-in-law (wife's sister) after one's wife's passing.

23 However, Ibn Ezra could respond that the change of identity is hinted at in the *p'shuto shel mikra* by the change of name from Re'uel to Yisro between *Shemos* 2 and *Shemos* 3.

contradiction. Rashi reinterprets the simple meaning of the *Shemos* Passage, while Ibn Ezra reinterprets the simple meaning of the *Bamidbar* Passage. I would like to make the modest proposal that we leave both passages alone, in their simple meaning. Let's interpret the *Shemos* Passage as Ibn Ezra does: Re'uel is Moshe's father-in-law—truly its simple *p'shat*. Also, let's interpret the *Bamidbar* Passage (as illuminated by the *Shoftim* Passage) as Rashi does: Chovav the son of Re'uel is Moshe's father-in-law, not his brother-in-law—again truly its simple *p'shat*.

If Chovav and Re'uel are both names for Moshe's father-in-law, **and** Chovav is the son of Re'uel as stated explicitly, then we have a problem: it would follow that Re'uel's father was also named Re'uel. That's not plausible.

Or is it? Let's look at **context**. Have we ever seen this phenomenon in Tanach, of a name passed from one generation to the next? The answer is yes, we've seen it several times, and it's always been in a particular special circumstance. First: the king of *Plishtim* in *Gerar*, named Avimelech, is encountered by Avraham in *Bereishis* 20. Many decades later, in *Bereishis* 26, Yitzchak has a run-in with the king of *Plishtim*, also called Avimelech, who doesn't seem to have learned very much from the first encounter. In the *p'shuto shel mikra*, this Avimelech is the son of the first king. This view is explicitly cited by Ramban,[24] who mentions that the Targum Onkelos supports it.[25] In further support, Ramban recalls that the king of *Plishtim* at the time of David *HaMelech* is also called Avimelech. Both the Avimelech of Avraham and the Avimelech of Yitzchak have a general named Pichol; again, the second may be the son of the first.

Next: Agag appears to be the name of all kings of Amalek, as implied by its use in one of Bil'am's orations (*Bamidbar* 24:7) well before the Agag featured in the book of *Shmuel*. The king of Yerushalayim, in various different eras, is called Malki-Tzedek or its variant Adoni-

---

24 *Bereishis* 26:1

25 I believe that Ramban is referring to the *Targum* on *Bereishis* 26:28, which deals with the vow made by Yitzchak and Avimelech. The *Targum* adds an idea to the literal translation: that the vow that is being made now should be כעין מומתא דהוה בין אבהתנא—like the vow between our fathers. Underlying this statement is the view that the original vow made by Avraham was with Avimelech's father, also named Avimelech.

Tzedek.[26] Finally, the king of *Mitzrayim* is always named Pharaoh, with the name transferred from father to son.[27] The special circumstance shared by all these cases is that these names are attached to a leadership position. For lack of a better term, let's call them "leadership names." Such names, it seems, were inherited, along with the position they were attached to.[28]

Does this help us in any way? Let's look at **language**. What does the name רעואל (Re'uel) mean? It could reasonably be translated as "friend of G-d" (from רֵעַ) or "shepherd of G-d" (from רוֹעֶה). Or if, remembering Re'uel's pagan origins, we assume the word אל is חול (i.e., not Divine), we might better say "friend of the god", or "shepherd of the god". **Both of these meanings would be highly appropriate for the leadership name of the pagan religious leader of Midian, the *Kohein Midian*.**

---

26 *Bereishis* 14:18, *Yehoshua* 10:1, and *Tehillim* 110:4

27 This entire phenomenon, with respect to the names of kings, is tersely summarized by the celebrated *pashtan* Rashbam (*Bamidbar* 24:7). He states: כל מלכי עמלק נקראין אגג, כמו כל מלכי מצרים קרוים פרעה, מלכי פלשתים אבימלך, ושל ירושלים מלכי צדק, אדוני צדק.

28 It is also reasonable to think of a leadership name as a kind of title. The key point is that this title is used grammatically as a name. This means that it effectively replaces the given name in sentences in which it is used. Even if *Par'oh* may have had another name (Rameses, for example) the Torah will never say *Par'oh Rameses*, but just *Par'oh*, with *Par'oh* effectively becoming the name. [Please note that the above statement is true in the Torah, but in the later books of *Melachim* and *Yirmiyah*, expressions such as *Par'oh Necho* and *Par'oh Chofra* are used (see *Melachim Bais* 23:29 and *Yirmiyah* 44:30 for examples). This demonstrates the fact, well known both to the *Rishonim* and to academic scholars, that the language of Tanach evolved from the early books to the later books.] Also, the word *Par'oh* in Biblical Hebrew will never appear in the plural (unlike in modern Hebrew, in which the form for many Pharaohs would be *Par'onim*) and will never take a definite article (unlike in modern Hebrew, in which the form for "the Pharaoh" is *haPar'oh*). These grammatical restrictions are characteristic of names. The same grammatical restrictions that we noted for *Par'oh* are also true of Avimelech and of other leadership names. Thus, it matters little whether we think of leadership names as names or as titles; what matters is that they are treated linguistically as names.

Our proposal in a nutshell, then, is that **Re'uel is a leadership name, similar to Avimelech or Pharaoh, that was used by the *Kohein Midian*, whoever he was at the time**. Moshe's father-in-law Re'uel (also known as Yisro, Chovav, etc.) bore this name because he held this position. So did his father before him, also known as Re'uel. Thus it's perfectly reasonable to refer to Moshe's father-in-law as Chovav the son of Re'uel, as we see in the *Bamidbar* Passage, and we have no contradiction.

VII. Have We Gained Anything Else?

Let us tentatively accept our proposal, for the sake of the argument. Does it help us in any other way (beyond providing a resolution for the contradiction we started with)? If it does, perhaps we can feel a bit more confident about it. Let's do some exploration in this area.

- **A Plethora of Names:** Perhaps you have wondered why Yisro has so many names (seven, according to one midrash!). *Chazal* and the *Rishonim* were sensitive to this issue and gave explanations that allude to names added upon Yisro's conversion or due to specific good deeds that he performed. Explaining that one of the names (Re'uel) is a leadership name helps us to understand this unusual multiplicity, which exists even in the *p'shuto shel mikra*.
- **The Distribution of Names:** It is reasonable to assume, if Re'uel is the name that goes with the position of *Kohein Midian*, that when Yisro began to distance himself from idolatry he stopped using it. This is **precisely** consistent with the distribution of names that we find in the Chumash. In our first encounter with him (*Shemos* 2), he is called Re'uel, his leadership name in his idolatrous post. He gives his daughter to Moshe, who joins his household and begins to influence him for the better. Years pass. By the time of the burning bush theophany, Yisro may still be the *Kohein Midian* (in fact, he is referred to as such in *Shemos* 3) but is beginning to have his doubts about paganism. To hint at this, the Torah does not call him Re'uel in this episode. In fact, he is **never again** called Re'uel, just Yisro (or Yeser) and Chovav. In *Bamidbar*, Yisro is referred to as Chovav son of Re'uel. Yisro's father, who had also been Priest of Midian in his day, never re-

nounced his paganism. So *he*, in contrast, continued to be called Re'uel.[29]

- **The Description *Kohein Midian*:** If Re'uel is a leadership name that belongs automatically to the *Kohein Midian*, one might expect that the Torah wouldn't say *Re'uel Kohein Midian*—this expression would be redundant.[30] In fact, we find that this is **exactly** true. In *Shemos* 2, we hear mention of the description *Kohein Midian*, and (separately) of the name Re'uel, but the name and the description are not put together. In contrast, in both *Shemos* 3 and in *Parashas Yisro* we are told about *Yisro Kohein Midian*. Based on our proposal, we now understand why the description *Kohein Midian* is combined with the one name (Yisro) and not with the other (Re'uel).

VIII. Is This Really New?

The mystery about Re'uel has been discussed so many times, over such a long history, by so many great people, that it is with some trepidation that one suggests a new solution. If it makes sense, why don't the *mefarshim* say it? It seems to me, though, that this approach

---

29 My illustrious friend and brother-in-law Rabbi David Fohrman was treated to an oral rendition of my proposal for the name Re'uel at the Shabbos table. He suggested, כדרכו בקודש, that using this approach, we can perhaps perceive a special resonance in the *Bamidbar* reference to Chovav ben Re'uel. Why mention the father at all? Why do we need to know Chovav's father's name? It may be that this is a method of stressing the special righteousness of Yisro / Chovav. *Despite* having a father (Re'uel) who spent his entire life as a prominent idolater, Yisro gave it up and became a *tzaddik* so righteous as to merit Moshe's entreaties to stay on permanently with *B'nei Yisrael*, and this is subtly hinted by the phrasing Chovav ben Re'uel.

30 Similar logic applies to the phrases *Par'oh* and *Melech Mitzrayim*: the Torah almost always says one or the other, but not both together. However, we must grant that the Torah does at times use the single phrase *Par'oh Melech Mitzrayim* (seven times, which represents a small fraction of the number of occurrences of *Par'oh* alone or of *Melech Mitzrayim* alone). This demonstrates that the Torah does sometimes allow a modicum of apparent redundancy, for specific reasons which may not always be known to us. Still, our overall point appears to be a valid one.

is defeatist and should probably be resisted. Taken to its logical extreme, this approach would eliminate all *chiddush* in Torah, surely not a good thing.

Also, even if this proposal has not been explicitly made by one of our commentators, it is implicit in a famous statement of our Sages. At the beginning of *Parashas Yisro*, Rashi notes (based on the *Mechilta*)

שבע שמות נקראו לו: רעואל, יתר, יתרו, חובב, חבר, קיני, פוטיאל.

The view of this midrash is that Yisro had seven names. Included on this list are Re'uel and Chovav. But an explicit *pasuk* in our *Bamidbar* Passage states that Chovav is the **son** of Re'uel. Did the *Tanna* of this *Mechilta* forget this verse? Surely not! If, as this *Mechilta* tells us, Chovav and Re'uel are the same person, and we also know from an explicit *pasuk* that Chovav is the son of Re'uel, then it follows without question that there were two Re'uels, a father and a son. So it appears that our basic premise that there were two Re'uels is presupposed by Chazal in this well-known midrash.

In contrast, the approaches of both Rashi and Ibn Ezra to resolve our contradiction would remove a name from the list of seven. For Rashi (supported by a different midrash—the *Sifre*), Re'uel is not Yisro, but is Yisro's father.[31] For Ibn Ezra (not supported by any midrash, as is his right when studying *p'shuto shel mikra*), Chovav is not Yisro, but is Yisro's son. Only by assuming two Re'uels, as we do in our analysis for a different reason, can we validate the simple in-

---

[31] In *Parashas Yisro*, after quoting the above *Mechilta* to the effect that Yisro had seven names, Rashi quotes as a יש אומרים the view that Re'uel is Yisro's father. Some of the supercommentaries on Rashi are bothered by this (see *Sifsei Chachamim* on *Shemos* 18:1). They ask that if Re'uel is Yisro's father, Yisro would not have seven names, but only six, while Rashi has just stated that he has seven. They answer that at this point Rashi is no longer working with the midrash that says he has seven names, but with other *midrashim*. This kind of answer is perhaps appropriate for the *Mefarshei Rashi*, whose focus is on the consistency of the text of Rashi. But, as we noted above, we also need to explain the apparent difficulty in the midrash itself, which the *Mefarshei Rashi* did not do: how can one state that Chovav and Re'uel are both names of Yisro, if we all accept that Chovav is the son of Re'uel, as stated in an explicit verse in *Bamidbar*?

terpretation of the famous statement of the *Mechilta* that Yisro had seven names.[32]

IX. Conclusion

My goal in writing this essay has been twofold: to lay out a particular solution for a particular longstanding problem; and to explicate the technique of *p'shuto shel mikra* as I understand it. From my perspective, the second of these goals is the more important of the two. It is intentional that the title of this essay uses the phrasing "Finding a New Solution to an Age-Old Puzzle" rather than merely "A New Solution to an Age-Old Puzzle." *P'shuto shel mikra* is a process, not a fixed body of solutions. ☙

This essay is dedicated to my parents, Rabbi Joel Balsam and Dr. Dvorah Balsam, who have inspired me in so many ways, including ways that they may not even be aware of; and also to Lashon HaKodesh, one of the great loves of my life.

---

32 **Note:** It was pointed out to me by a friend who read a draft of this essay that the Mizrachi on Rashi in our *Bamidbar* passage explicitly supports our basic premise that there were two Re'uels. In explaining the midrashic view that Re'uel was one of Yisro's names, Mizrachi notes that it would follow from this together with the *Bamidbar* passage that the father and the son were both called Re'uel— צ"ל שיתרו ואביו שניהם נקראו בשם רעואל. Mizrachi does not elaborate further, but his statement serves to validate the starting point of our analysis.