

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XIV: Va'era (Ex. 6:2–9:35)

Essay 5. Is “Putiel” a worthy or shameful name for Jethro?

פְּסוּק "לְקַח-לוֹ מִבְּנוֹת פּוּטִיאל", קָשָׁה אִיךָ פָּגַם הַקַּב"ה בְּכַבּוֹדוֹ שֶׁל יִתְרוֹ אַחֲרֵי שֶׁנִּתְגַּיֵּיר לְקַרְוֹא לוֹ הַשֵּׁם עַל זְכוּרוֹן מַעֲשָׂיו הַרְאִישׁוֹנִים שֶׁפָּטַם עֲגָלִים לְעִבּוּדָה זָרָה. וְהָא אֲמַרְיֵנן בְּמַצִּיעָא אִם הָיָה בֶן גֵּרִים לֹא יֹאמֵר לוֹ זְכוּר מַעֲשֵׂה אָבוֹתֶיךָ זְכוּר מַעֲשֵׂיךָ הַרְאִישׁוֹנִים. בְּשִׁלְמָא לְמַאן דְּאָמַר מְזַרְע יוֹסֵף שֶׁפָּטַט בְּיִצְרוֹ נִיחָא דְשִׁבַּח הוּא לוֹ, אֲבָל זֶה גְּנָאֵי לוֹ.

There is a verse: “[Aaron’s son Eleazar] took one of the daughters of Putiel.”¹ The Gemara has three suggestions: (1) that the bride was a daughter or granddaughter of Jethro, who was referred to as Putiel because “he fattened [*pittem*] [פִּיטֵם] calves for idol worship;” (2) that she was a descendant of Joseph, who was referred to as Putiel because “he mocked [*pitpet*] [פִּיטֵפֵט] his desire” by resisting the advances of Potiphar’s wife; or (3) that she was descended from both Joseph and Jethro.² Rashi’s comment on this verse follows the third opinion.

A question is how did the Holy One, Blessed be He, blemish the honor of Jethro after he became a proselyte, by calling him this name in remembrance of his early deeds, when he fattened calves for idol worship. It says in Bava Metziah, “If one is the child of converts, one may not say to him: Remember the deeds of your ancestors, remember your earlier deeds.”³

It’s right according to the one who said, “[He is called Putiel because he is] from the line of Joseph, who mocked his desire [by resisting the advances of Potiphar’s wife].” It’s fine if that’s the case, for this is praise for [Joseph], but it is disgraceful for [Jethro].

וַיֵּשׁ לֹאמַר דָּגַם זֶה שִׁבַּח הוּא לוֹ, שְׂאָף עַל פִּי שֶׁהָיָה אָדוּק בְּעִבּוּדָה זָרָה שֶׁפָּטַם עֲגָלִים, עִם כָּל זֶה שִׁבַּח שֵׁם עִבּוּדָה זָרָה לְגַמְרֵי, וְזֶה רוֹמֵז מֵלֵת פּוּטִיאל, דְּשֵׁם הַשִּׁבְחָה הוּא פּוּטִ"ה וְלֹא כְמוֹ שֶׁגִּדְפַס בְּתִיקוּנֵי שִׁבְת פּוּטִ"ה, וְהֵינּוּ פּוּטִיאל שֶׁשִּׁבַּח אֵל גֵּר, אִי נִמְי שֶׁשִּׁבַּח הַעִבּוּדָה זָרָה וְדַבַּק בְּאֵל חֵי.

It can be said that this is also praise for [Jethro], because even though he had been attached to idol worship, as he fattened calves for sacrifice to idols, nevertheless he forgot the

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¹ Ex. 6:25.

² Sotah 43a; Bava Batra 109b.

³ Mishnah Bava Metzia 4:10 (and Bava Metzia 58b): “If one is a penitent, one may not say to him: Remember your earlier deeds. If one is the child of converts, one may not say to him: Remember the deeds of your ancestors.”

name of idol worship entirely. This hints at the word “Putiel,” for the name of the angel of forgetfulness is *Putah*, properly spelled פּוּטָ"ה, and not spelled as it is published in *Tikkunei Shabbat*,⁴ פּוּתָ"ה.⁵ This was the meaning of Putiel, that he forgot the strange god,⁶ or alternatively, that he forgot idol worship and clung to the living G-d.⁷ The implication is that such a reference would be a praise, because he completely eliminated idolatry from his life.

וּבְנֵיהֶם יוֹבֵן הַטַּעַם מִהָרָאוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמַעֲשֵׂה דְזִמְרִי לֹמַר עַל פְּנֵחָס הַרְאִיתָם בֶּן פּוּטִי זֶה שֶׁפָּטַם אֲבִי אִמּוֹ עֲגָלִים וְכוּ', לְפִי שִׁידוּעַ שְׁזִמְרִי תַפְסָה בְּבִלְוֵרִיתָהּ וּבָא אֶצֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאָמַר לוֹ זֹ אֲסוּרָה אוֹ מוֹתֶרֶת וְאִם תֹּאמַר אֲסוּרָה בַת יִתְרוֹ מִי הִתִּירָה לָהּ וְכוּ'. וּפְנֵחָס זָכָה בַּפַּעַם הַזֹּאת שִׁיְהִיָּהּ לוֹ זִכְרוֹן יוֹמֵר מִמֶּשֶׁה וְכָל יִשְׂרָאֵל, שֶׁמִּכְלָם גִּתְעַלְמָה הַהֶלְכָה שֶׁל הַבּוֹעֵל אֶרְמִית וְכוּ', וּמִטַּעַם זֶה הִרְגָה אֶת זִמְרִי. וְיִשְׂרָאֵל הָיוּ מִתְקַנְאִים וְשׁוֹנְאִים אוֹתוֹ וּבָאוּ לְהַרְאוֹת שֶׁעֲשָׂה שְׁלֵא כְּדִין. וְכַנּוֹנְתָם הִיָּתָה לֹמַר שֶׁאֵי אֶפְשָׁר לְפָרֵשׁ הַפְּסוּק שֶׁל "לְקַח-לוֹ מִבְּנוֹת פּוּטִיאֵל" לְשִׁבְחָה כְּמוֹ שֶׁפִּירְשְׁנוּ לְעֵיל, לְפִי שִׁיְתָרוֹ הִיָּה כּוֹמֵר לְעַבּוֹדָה זָרָה וְאִדּוּק בָּהּ עַד שֶׁהִיָּה מְפָטָם עֲגָלִים וְכוּ'.

Thus the reason will be understood, what did Israel see in the incident with Zimri to say about Pinchas, after he killed them: “Have you seen this son of Puti, the father of whose mother used to fatten calves for idolatrous sacrifices!”⁸ Zimri was a prince of one of the tribes of Israel, and everyone knew that Zimri was engaging in relations with a Midianite woman, Cozbi.⁹ **As it is known, Zimri had grabbed hold of [the Midianite woman] by the forelock and came before Moses and said to him, “Is she forbidden or permitted? And if you’ll say that she’s forbidden, [then] who permitted the daughter of Jethro to you?”**¹⁰ Moses was paralyzed by the challenge, but Pinchas merited at this time to have a better memory than Moses and all of Israel, for all of them had forgotten the halacha of “one who engages in intercourse with an Aramean woman, zealots strike him [and kill him],”¹¹ and for this reason, [Pinchas] killed Zimri and Cozbi.

But the Israelites were jealous and hated [Pinchas] and came to show that he did not act legally. Their intention was to say that it is impossible to interpret the verse of “He took one of the daughters of Putiel” as praise, as we interpreted above, because Jethro wasn’t just a worshipper of idols, but was actually a priest of idolatry and was devoted to it to the extent that he fattened calves for others to sacrifice to the idols.

⁴ *Tikkunei Shabbat* [Krakow 1650], prayer book for the Sabbath.

⁵ The angel of forgetfulness is also known as Purah, פּוּרָה. The word also means “winepress,” and the connection may be that drinking wine to excess causes forgetfulness.

⁶ Deut. 32:12.

⁷ Joshua 3:10; Hosea 2:1; Ps. 84:3; Dan. 6:21; Dan. 6:27.

⁸ Sanhedrin 82b; Bava Batra 109b; Sotah 43a.

⁹ Num. 25:6–15.

¹⁰ Sanhedrin 82a.

¹¹ Mishnah Sanhedrin 9:6; Sanhedrin 81b; Avodah Zarah 36b; Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 9:7.

ובפרק ב' דעבודת זרה (דף כ"ו ע"ב) פירש רש"י דבור המתחיל "מינין", כומרים לעבודת זרה בין נכרים ובין ישראל עכ"ל. והתוספות בפרק קמא דחולין (דף י"ג ע"ב) כתבו דמין נכרי האדוק בעבודת זרה הוא יותר גרוע ממין ישראל וכו'. ובפרק קמא דעבודת זרה אמרינן דמי שהוא מין אי אפשר שישוב, דכתיב "כל־באיה לא ישובו".

In the second chapter of tractate Avodah Zarah (page 26b), we read that heretics may be lowered into a pit on the Sabbath, and Rashi explains (at the words beginning “heretics”) that [“heretics” refers to] priests of idolatry, whether non-Jewish or Jewish. But the Tosafists in the first chapter of tractate Chullin (page 13b) wrote that a non-Jewish heretic who is devoted to idolatry is worse than a Jewish heretic. Also, in the first chapter of tractate Avodah Zarah (page 17a), it is said that it is impossible for one who is a heretic to repent, as it is written, “All who go to her cannot return.”¹²

ומעתה יתרו שהיה כומר ואדוק בעבודת זרה אי אפשר שישכח שם עבודת זרה, ואם כן אי אפשר נמי שפוטריאל בא לרמוז ששכח שם עבודת זרה. אלא נדאי שרצה לומר שאף על פי שהיו בנות יתרו שהיה מין עם כל זה הותרו למשה ואלעזר, זו היתה ממש טענת זמרי, זו אסורה או מותרת.

Now, as Jethro was a priest and devoted to idolatry, it was impossible for him to have forgotten the name of idol worship, and if so, it is impossible that the name Putiel came to hint that he forgot the name of idol worship. Rather, certainly it means to say that even though they were daughters of Jethro, who was a heretic, nevertheless they were permitted to Moses and to Elazar. This was the actual claim of Zimri, “Is she forbidden or permitted?”

ושמא תאמר שאותן הבנות נתגיירו בלב שלם הואיל שלא היו כל כך אדוקות בעבודת זרה כאביהן ומשום הכי הותרו למשה ואלעזר דאי לא הכי לא היו נושאים אותן אלו שהיו גדולי ישראל. אם כן אפשר נמי שאף כזבי נתגיירה בסתר קודם שבא עליה זמרי, ומן הספק לא היה לו לפתחם להרוג אותם, ומשום הכי אמרו ראייתם וכו' יהרוג נשיא שבט מישראל.

Perhaps you will say that those daughters converted wholeheartedly, because they were not so devoted to idolatry as their fathers, and for that reason they were permitted to Moses and Elazar. For if this is not so, [Moses and Elazar] would not have married them, for they were great men in Israel. If so, it's also possible that even Cozbi had converted secretly before Zimri had relations with her, and out of that doubt it was improper for Pinchas to kill them. Because of this, [those challenging Pinchas] said, “Have you seen this son of Puti, the father of whose mother used to fatten calves for idolatrous sacrifices,” should such a man kill a prince of a tribe of Israel?

Of course, from parashat Pinchas, we know that Pinchas' actions were validated, and G-d rewarded him.

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¹² Prov. 2:19.