

SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

511 Ave. R Brooklyn, NY 11223-2093
Rabbi Moshe Shamah, Director

718 998 8171 Fax: 718 375 3263
Rabbi Ronald Barry, Administrator

בס"ד

Parashat Shemot Part II Exodus Chapter 2 – On Moses

1. Birth and Rescue

The first chapter of Exodus closes at the low point of the oppression: Pharaoh had commanded his nation “cast all [Israelite] newborn boys into the Nile” (Exod. 1:22). The Torah does not elaborate, leaving it to the reader to imagine the many painful consequences of the decree. The following verse begins narrating the amazing confluence of events that initiated the process of Israel’s redemption. From behind the scenes, G-d begins to intervene.

A woman has a son during the time of the decree, a courageous act as widespread abstinence is assumed to have prevailed. She and her husband are unidentified (“a man,” “a woman”) except for the fact of their pedigree. He is a member of the house of Levi (future covenant heroes and sanctuary servitors) while she is a daughter of Levi. In treating them anonymously the text reflects the furtiveness of their activity. They engaged in an act of faith and determination.

Upon the baby’s birth, the mother notes **וַיִּרְאֶה אֹתוֹ כִּי טוֹב הוּא** (“she saw him that he was good” [Exod. 2:2]), words that remind the reader of Genesis 1 where it states **וַיִּרְאֶה אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאֹר כִּי טוֹב הָיָה** (“and G-d saw the light that it was good”). By adding the grammatically unnecessary pronoun, “She saw *him*, that he was good,” the connection is made to the creation of light, for of all the individual steps of creation it is only in regard to light (the first) that the Torah explicitly states the particular object that G-d saw. (In the other individual steps of creation the wording is, “And G-d saw that it was good.”) The parallelism seems to imply that with this birth G-d is initiating a new phase of creation and that He has endowed this boy with the potential to bring enlightenment to the world. One is also reminded that G-d revealed to Jeremiah that He sometimes intervenes in human affairs to bring about

the birth of an individual with the potential to be of great value to the nation and the world. He told the prophet: **בְּטֶרֶם אֶצְרְךָ בַבֶּטֶן יָדַעְתִּיךָ** (“Before I formed you in the womb, I knew [selected] you” [Jer. 1:5]).

After three months, when the mother could no longer conceal her son, she must act. (The text had not previously revealed that the authorities had implemented such strict standards of surveillance.) She takes a papyrus *tebah* (a box or basket), caulks it with plaster and pitch, places her son in it and sets it in the reeds by the side of the Nile, hoping for the best. The boy’s sister stands watch from a distance to see what might develop. The only other attestation of the word *tebah* in Scripture is Noah’s ark, the vehicle that brought the great salvation of humankind and all living species from destruction by water. This association prompts the reader to contemplate that just as Noah launched a new start for the world, so too, in another sphere, this baby is being primed.

An Egyptian princess (**בַּת פְּרֹעֹה**, “daughter of Pharaoh”) notices the basket, has her maid retrieve it and upon seeing the infant realizes he was a Hebrew child. (Some conjecture that perhaps she noted that he was circumcised, a practice Egyptians did not perform on infants. But in any event, the predicament of the Hebrews would point to it being one of their boys.) She had compassion on the boy and, in defiance of her father’s decree, would not allow him to die. As in the case of the midwives, the Torah portrays compassion and human conscience as more potent than the mighty decrees of evil tyrants. Also, as in the case of the midwives, a non-Israelite woman is instrumental in furthering the salvation of Israel.

The baby’s sister comes forth and succeeds in conversing with the princess. The princess accepts the girl’s suggestion to summon a wet nurse and the girl calls the boy’s mother. The princess entrusts the infant

to her, saying, “nurse him for me and I shall pay your wages.” Moses is raised at home!

When “the boy was grown” (Exod. 2:10) – undoubtedly weaned, which was generally at about three years of age but often slightly later in ancient Egypt – his mother brought him to the princess. Use of the unusual term “grown” for a very young child (וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד) – in place of the expected “weaned” (וַיִּנְגַּל) – indicates that by this time Moses had reached a formidable level of understanding. This explains how he knew, and identified with, his ethnic identity (as disclosed in verse 11).

The princess adopts the boy, literally, “he becomes to her a son” (v. 10). She names him Moses (transliterated *Moshe* in Hebrew, the “s” and “sh” sounds often interchanging.) In Egyptian, *mose* derives from the stem that connotes “born” and means “son.” The term was popular as a suffix attached to the appellation of a god, meaning “born of so-and-so god” or “the son of so-and-so god,” such as attested in the names of the kings Ahmose, Thutmose and Rameses. In explaining the name, she said: “because I drew him from the water.”

A linguistic link between “Moses” and “drew him [from the water]” has not been found to exist in Egyptian but does exist in Hebrew (מָשַׁח, “drew him”). Accordingly, some have questioned whether it was the princess or the mother who named the boy and gave the interpretation of his name. Both mother and princess are subjects of verbal clauses in the verse that concludes with the naming of the boy and the interpretation. But since it is the princess who is the subject of the clause immediately preceding the naming, the preferred reading would see her as the one doing the action unless there was a compelling explanation to parse the verse otherwise.

Abarbanel suggests that the mother may have named the child and provided the explanation. It may have been the custom (especially in the case of an adoption) that the wet nurse did so since she cared for the child for so long. If the princess did not like the name she would reject it. He assumes that the mother explains the name to the princess with the second person statement: “because you drew him from the water.” This is a grammatically possible interpretation but, all-in-all, far-fetched. Ibn Ezra considers it

possible that the princess knew some Hebrew or asked about it, but this also is a remote possibility. Having violated the infanticide decree, it is inconceivable that she would publicize her adopted son’s ethnic background by accepting a Hebrew name for him.

Perhaps after naming the boy “Moses” the princess said “because I drew him from the water” in Egyptian, without intending the latter clause to be a linguistic link to the name. There surely would be a tendency to connect “born” or “child of” with the fact that she drew him forth from the water. Indeed, she may have named the boy “child of the water.” In transliteration, however, the Torah may have maintained the core name but deleted the additional element that might have been attached to it (which may have had an idolatrous connotation), and translated her explanation into its Hebrew approximation with the available word play.

Thus, we see that through a group of independent-minded and praiseworthy women, Israel’s future leader is born and rescued, nursed and nurtured at home. He is then raised as a prince in the royal domain of the enemy of his people. Did Pharaoh on occasion play with the child Moses? Mighty kings may issue their brutal decrees, but G-d governs the world and His plan will prevail.

Significantly, this passage,* which focuses on Moses as a child, contains eight attestations of the stem יָלַד (child), all in reference to Moses (including the princess’ מִיִּלְדֵי הָעֶבְרָיִם זֶה, “this [he] is from the Hebrew boys”). As we have often noted, the number eight connotes the covenant with G-d; in this case it seems to reflect G-d’s covenantal intervention**. The center word of the 141 words of the section (which clearly concludes with v. 10) is הַיֶּלֶד of verse 6; that is to say that there are seventy words before it and seventy words after it. This does not appear to be coincidental, as seventy seems to represent the “old order” of perfection in the Torah.

2. As a Youth

Some years later, when Moses was grown – again *vayigdal* is used, this time with Moses’ name, connoting a stage of maturation – “he went out to his brethren and looked into their burdens” (וַיֵּרָא בְּטַבְלֵתָם) [Exod. 2:11]). He knew his brethren, was sensitive to

their plight and empathized with them. He saw an Egyptian striking a Hebrew, probably in what he assumed was a life-threatening manner, although use of the word *makeh* leaves the matter ambiguous. וַיִּפֶּן נֹכַח וַיִּרְאֶה כִּי אֵין אִישׁ – “He looked this way and that way,” and upon being satisfied that there was no witness around, he smote the Egyptian and buried him in the sand (v. 12). An alternate possibility is that the expression וַיִּפֶּן נֹכַח וַיִּרְאֶה כִּי אֵין אִישׁ means that he looked about for somebody who would rescue the victim. When he saw that no one was about, he realized that the responsibility was his. (See Isa. 59:16: וַיִּרְאֶה כִּי אֵין אִישׁ and 41:28: וַיִּרְאֶה וְאֵין אִישׁ, both used in the sense of looking for a properly acting person.) Regardless of the explanation, Moses is surely expected to ascertain that there are no observers to his act.

From this episode we learn a great deal about Moses. He was compassionate, energetic, bold and courageous, quickly stirred to great passion. He was not lulled into complacency by the privileged position he had enjoyed. He risked his high status and life of luxury for the sake of one of his brethren. However, especially as it turned out that his deed became known, we also see that he was impulsive. (A late Midrash sees the young Moses as wrongly hotheaded for having killed the Egyptian, who it assumes was only striking the Hebrew without intention to kill, but, again, this is not clear from the text. It is not even certain from the text that the Egyptian did not kill the Hebrew. The word “strike” used for the Egyptian is the same root used for Moses’ act of striking the Egyptian, *makeh* and *vayakh*.)

The next day Moses again went out to his brethren, despite the previous day’s dangerous encounter. Once he became aware of his brethren’s situation he could not keep away. He saw two Hebrew men fighting and again he intervened, rebuking the רָשָׁע (wicked person), “why do you strike your fellow?” (v. 13). The rebuked party totally rejects the reproof and sharply castigates Moses with the challenge, “who made you the man [who is] chief and judge over us?” One wonders: In Moses’ passion to see justice done, did he again act impulsively? Can “He said to the wicked person” mean he addressed the one whom he considered the wicked party? But there are generally two sides to a story, and it requires a fair hearing to arrive at the truth (Deut. 25:1)! The beautiful lesson

that Resh Laqish affixed to this verse (popularized by Rashi), is edifying: “Whosoever raises his hand against his fellow, even if he did not as yet strike him, is called a wicked person, as Moses stated ‘why do you hit?’ not ‘why did you hit?’” (*b. Sanh.* 58b). Though a lesson to be taken to heart, it surely is not based on the *peshat*.

The rebuked party also told Moses: “Do you intend to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” (v. 14). Somehow, the matter was known and Moses was fearful of what might now happen. It should be noted that by referring to the dead man as “the Egyptian,” the Hebrew man indicates that he knows Moses is not Egyptian.

The second episode confirms and adds to what was revealed of Moses’ character and disposition in the first. Moses is exceptionally idealistic and a devoted “activist.” He is exceedingly troubled by injustice and wrongful behavior and easily stirred to what he believes to be corrective intervention. His concern for his brethren encompasses a desire to have them conduct themselves properly; their severe oppression is not an excuse to ignore their inappropriate behavior. But he is impatient and imprudent, wanting to see quick results. And he is not focused on his own welfare.

Moses would like to be a liberator of his people as well as bring them to a high level of morality, but clearly it cannot be his way. Perhaps the victim he rescued from the Egyptian taskmaster revealed the slaying, perhaps Moses was not careful when he looked around. But as a result of his manner of doing things he now had to fear the repercussions of his first intervention and had major resistance from his own people (foreshadowing an important aspect of the future).

Moses did not immediately flee Egypt, but Pharaoh soon heard of the matter and sought to kill him. The fact that he was the adopted son of one of Pharaoh’s daughters could not save him from the decree. Perhaps in the investigation after the killing his background came to light. In any event, killing an Egyptian (taskmaster?) was an act of defiance against Pharaoh’s policy and a sign of support for the Hebrew slaves, matters too serious to be excused. “Moses fled from Pharaoh’s presence and settled in the land of

Midian” (v. 15). Later on, when he named his second son Eliezer, he explained: “For the G-d of my father was my help and He rescued me from the sword of Pharaoh” (18:4). These verses imply that Moses’ escape was a close call.

The larger implications are clear. Moses may become a great messenger for G-d, but he will only be a messenger. His remarkable characteristics will be greatly helpful to him in his mission, perhaps necessary qualifications. But it will be G-d’s personal intervention that will redeem Israel and only with His lawgiving will the nation achieve righteousness.

3. In Midian

Sitting by a well in Midian, southeast of Canaan and beyond Egypt’s reach, Moses observes an episode of exploitation of the powerless. Seven sisters came to the well, drew water and filled the drinking troughs for their father’s sheep. Before their sheep drank some male shepherds arrived and chased the girls away. Although a total stranger, a fugitive from Egyptian justice who had barely escaped with his life, and although the situation before him did not involve his people and may have been an everyday occurrence, Moses intervenes. His extreme lack of tolerance for injustice regardless of who was involved does not allow him to stand quietly by but propels him to act, in this case championing the cause of the exploited females by chasing away the shepherds.

Interestingly, the shepherds gave no resistance, submitting to the stranger’s passion for justice. Is this contrast with the reproof from his kinsman intended to shed further light on the difficulty of dealing with Israel and its stubbornness?

The girls were the seven daughters of the priest of Midian. The latter, in gratitude, invited Moses for a meal. Subsequently, Moses agreed to dwell with him and then married his daughter Zipporah. (Once again, a marriage was initiated with a stranger meeting a local girl at a well.) Moses remained in Midian a long time.

How old was Moses when “he went out to his brethren,” when he escaped from Egypt or when he got married? The Torah does not generally impart specific information on such matters, as its concern is

on the essentials. It usually leaves the incidental details to the interested reader’s assumptions based on general knowledge together with common sense, to tradition and imagination. That being said, historians have determined that the education of an upper class boy in ancient Egypt spanned about twelve years, commencing at a young age, and was taken seriously, occupying a significant part of the day. “Growing up,” with the time available to “go out,” probably followed graduation. His leaving Egypt, apparently having taken place shortly after the episodes described, has generally been assumed to be when he was an older teenager. “Moses fled from Pharaoh and settled in Midian and sat by the well” (Exod. 2:15) implies that his arrival in Midian was shortly afterwards. (That the book of Jubilees 47:1–48:1 considers him to have been forty-two years of age upon entering Midian is part of a *midrashic* agenda.)

The fact that Moses agreed to live by the priest of Midian (Jethro) and married his daughter surely indicates that this priest was a man notable in his religious outlook and practice. In accordance with ancient Near Eastern number symbolism,** the mention that he had seven daughters appears to support this view, since seven was then the number that indicated completion and perfection. He had achieved a status of spiritual dignity, the most that was obtainable without revelation and the covenant with G-d. This is implied in Jethro’s comments and advice to Moses when he visits him after the Exodus (Exod. 18).

Moses names his firstborn son גֵרְשֹׁם, perhaps derived from combining *ger sham*. This would signify that he felt he had been a “stranger there,” in Egypt, living among Egyptians, separated from family and brethren. Now he was settled with a family, no longer a stranger, apparently to remain for the long term. Surely he could not dare to visit Egypt. From G-d’s communication to him subsequent to the theophany at the burning bush we learn that through those many intervening years from when he escaped from Pharaoh a warrant for his life had been in effect there (Exod. 4:19).

For some reason the birth of Moses’ second son is not here narrated. He is first referred to, albeit not by name, when Moses prepares his family to travel to Egypt (v. 20). The Torah furnishes his name and

Moses' interpretation of it on the occasion of Jethro's coming with Moses' wife and two sons to him (18:4). As we mentioned earlier, the second son was named Eliezer, "for the G-d of my father was my help and He rescued me from the sword of Pharaoh" (18:4).

It is noteworthy that Midian was a tribal confederation that was descended from Abraham and Keturah (Gen. 25:2). Although "through Isaac will offspring be called to you" (21:12), the legacy Abraham transmitted to his other sons survived (25:6), albeit in an uneven manner. Thus, through his marriage, Moses connected with that aspect of the tradition that derived from the founding father of Israel through another channel.

We are not provided any further details of Moses' life until many years later when G-d deemed the time right and called upon him for his monumental mission. If numbers are to be interpreted literally (despite their compelling symbolic significance), Moses is eighty years of age when he stands before Pharaoh (7:7). We are not provided any information as to how he spent the many intervening years before G-d called to him except for the detail that "Moses was shepherding the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian" (Exod. 3:1) when he came upon the burning bush.

But the reader of Exodus 2 does know that during this extended period of time a leader of selfless and truly

extraordinary dimensions was maturing. It required time for idealism to be tempered with wisdom and for the impetuous youth to learn the virtue of patience, and deepen in his spirituality. This was an individual who would later be described by the Torah as the most humble man on earth (Num. 12:3), about whom G-d would say "Moses My servant, in all My house most trusted is he" (v. 7). A leader was developing who would be unique in the annals of mankind, one who would be worthy of being G-d's instrument in changing the course of history with the lawgiving.

Endnotes

* The passage begins after a *petuha* break (Exod. 2:1) and, by literary standards, concludes with verse 10, delineating what might be considered a "paragraph" of sorts, although at that point the Masoretic Text does not have a *parasha* break. As the Rambam, in codifying such aspects of the Masoretic Text, states, there had been great confusion concerning the matter of these breaks, a most complex subject (see *MT Laws Regarding Sefer Torah* 8:4). In any event, the following verse (11), beginning with וַיְהִי בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם, shifts the scene to years later and allows the previous to be viewed as its own unit.

** See our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*

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