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PARASHAT SHEMOT

The Young Moshe
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"And Moshe agreed to dwell with the man, and he gave Tziphora, his daughter, to Moshe. And she bore a son and he called him Gershom, for he said: 'I have been a stranger in a strange land.' And it came to pass during those many days that the king of Egypt died, and the children of Israel sighed from the labor and they cried... And Moshe shepherded the flock of Yitro his father-in-law, priest of Midyan, and he led the flock far into the desert..." ([Shemot 2:21-3:1](#))

With these few verses the Torah recounts the story of Moshe Rabbeinu's adult life, from the time he matures and goes out as a young man to see his brethren, to the time he returns to Egypt - at the age of eighty - to present himself and God's demands before Pharaoh. Several decades are squeezed into these three verses. Years and years go by between his frightened flight from Pharaoh's police and his return to his brethren, yet the Torah reveals nothing about his activities during this time. All the spiritual development and character-building that take place during these years is hidden from us. We know nothing of his spiritual trials and tribulations and their effects on his inner stature. Who is the Moshe who flees from Pharaoh and who is he who is called upon at the burning bush to deliver the nation of Israel; what are the changes that occur in him through his efforts to strive continually upwards in the building of his exalted personality? Obviously, we would be eager to learn what happens to him during this time, but the verses, as we have seen, leave out a large portion of his life, jumping from his youth to his fully mature status as God's elected emissary.

We shall focus on this period, attempting to understand what happens to Moshe during those "many days" and the meaning of the Torah's strange silence in this regard. However, before examining this parasha itself, let us first turn our attention to a similar situation regarding another exalted biblical personality - Avraham Avinu - and compare them.

Avraham, too, appears on the biblical scene in all his adult, full-blown spiritual glory, after he has already become "Avraham Ha-ivri," God's chosen. Our first meeting with him occurs after he has accepted the

Creator of heaven and earth, firm in his belief, calling out in God's name as he relentlessly lays the foundation of Am Yisrael.

Obviously, we are extremely interested in the process by which the father of our nation arrives at his faith and by the factors and events which influenced him. But here, too, the verses reveal nothing. However, if the verses do not distinguish in this regard between Moshe and Avraham, and the path which leads both of them to prophecy is obscure and unknown, the approach of the Midrash in these two instances is completely different. In the case of Moshe, the Midrash continues the Torah's policy of obscurity, while, when it comes to Avraham, Hazal expound at length on his actions and adventures in Haran and Ur Kasdim, in an attempt to complete the sketchy picture which arises from the biblical verses.

Why is this so? Why does the Midrash build such a detailed spiritual profile for the young Avraham ben Terah while refraining to do the same for Moshe ben Amram? The answer lies in a basic difference between these two personalities with regard to the nature of the "unknown period" in their respective lives, as is clear from a reading of the Torah narrative itself.

In fact, the Torah's silence with regard to Avraham prior to the command of "lekh-lekha" is not at all similar to its silence in the case of Moshe. Before Avraham's appearance in the Torah as a fully integrated personality confident in his path, we know nothing at all about him. However, from the moment he is introduced to us, there is a continuous and complete description of his deeds and actions. From his departure from Ur Kasdim until his burial in Hebron, from the construction of his first altar when he calls out in God's name until he binds his son on the altar on Mt. Moriah, there is no break in the continuity of the story. There are no periods of obscurity and secrecy in the story of Avraham's life; there is only a division of periods: the period prior to his appearance before us, and the period thereafter. The first period is not a "black hole" in the story of his life; it is rather the period prior to the story's beginning - it is pre-history. For reasons of its own the Torah chooses this division and leaves Avraham's early life out of the narrative. And, as is so often the case, that which the written Torah leaves out, the oral Torah fills in, expounding at length in the Midrash on those episodes where the verses chose brevity.

The same cannot be said of the story of Moshe, however. Here the Torah is silent not prior to his appearance in the verses but rather thereafter. From the time of his birth until his burial, the Torah is with him from cradle to grave. The period enveloped by the Torah's silence is not before or after the time framework of the story, but rather in its very midst. We hear of the birth of the young Levite, we read of his childhood in Pharaoh's palace, and we follow closely his actions as a young man when he goes out to his brothers. This early period is laid out before us in great detail until he suddenly disappears and all there is in the Torah is a long silence, which is not broken until he reappears several decades later.

Thus we are not talking of the period prior to the narrative framework, but rather of a disappearance in mid-narrative. Therefore we must realize that the disappearance is an integral part of the story itself. Moshe's flight to Midyan and the textual silence regarding his doings during that time are located in the midst of the story's time-frame, since they are part of the story. The lack of noteworthy events is itself an event - one of withdrawal and seclusion. Moshe's disappearance and silence following his escape to Midyan tell us that he secluded himself and changed the course of his life. He does not continue in the path he has trodden to date, but rather takes a completely new direction - towards seclusion and isolation. The silence of the text is an expression of the hermetic life of seclusion and isolation which Moshe lives in the desert during these years.

The non-story here is the story, and it is for this reason that the Midrash makes no effort to expound the narrative as it did in the case of Avraham: The story isn't lacking a chapter; it is told in full, but here the technique used is that of silence, expressing Moshe's concealment and seclusion - the essence of his existence during this period.

A close examination of the text reveals that this self-imposed isolation came in the wake of a crisis. Moshe underwent a profound crisis, as a result of which he took off to the desert and enveloped himself in silence. What was this crisis? What caused it and what were its consequences? In order to answer this question, we must review what happened to Moshe just prior to his departure from Egypt and his spiritual character at the time, as revealed to us by the text.

The Torah recounts two stories about Moshe prior to his departure for Midyan. The first describes his encounter with the Egyptian who is beating a Jew, while the second records what happens to him when he sees two Jews striking each other. If we were to sketch a picture of Moshe's personality based on the description offered in

these episodes, we would be faced with a youth (or young man) with a very high level of moral sensitivity, who cannot tolerate any expression of moral injustice. Moshe's spiritual refinement causes him to rise against any act of suppression or effort to trample the rights of others by use of force. A deep-seated moral flame burns deep within him when he sees the Egyptian beating the Jew, and a strong sense of injustice fills him as he watches the Jews fighting.

However, there is an additional quality which his sensitive nature possesses. Moshe will not be satisfied with the expression of moral indignation alone; he **must** act. Therefore, he reacts by attempting to correct the situation, unwilling to accept the existence of evil as such. He doesn't merely sit and bemoan the situation; he translates his feelings into actions. He is not the type to restrain himself in such a situation. He strikes the Egyptian, and he harshly rebukes his brethren. If there is justice - it must be immediately manifested!

The background, relating to Moshe's action, is worth pointing out. He has spent his life, until now, in Pharaoh's palace, lacking nothing. He has received all his needs throughout life and has never encountered deprivation, discrimination or injustice directed against either himself or his immediate surroundings. The helplessness of the innocent in the face of the tyrant and the sense of cruel Fate are completely foreign to him. He is unfamiliar with the experience of trying to cope with a cruel and unjust regime, or the encounter with the neighborhood bully who strikes fear into the heart of his neighbors. Undoubtedly he knows that Bnei Yisrael were enslaved and forced into hard labor, but only the firsthand encounter with such reality makes him experience and realize the suffering of his brethren.

This encounter between a noble and sensitive soul, inexperienced in the tribulations of life outside of the palace walls, and the obtuse reality of the world, is what gives rise to Moshe's inner crisis. Actually, it is a double crisis: Firstly, the very existence of such a harsh reality gives him no rest, and in addition he is unable to grasp how Bnei Yisrael have come to terms with their bitter fate and are not rebelling against it.

On the first day, upon encountering the Egyptian, whip in hand, Moshe immediately reacts to the injustice. "And he struck the Egyptian and buried him in the sand." No questions are asked, no discussion need be had and no second thoughts ensue. He acts on the spot, burning with zealotry for justice and morality. All his feelings of justice and truth are aroused and find immediate expression.

However, the situation is not so simple and straight-forward. Coupled with the description of Moshe's action, the Torah sees fit to point out that before striking, Moshe takes one preliminary precaution: "And he turned this way and that and saw that there was no-one." By taking this necessary precaution, Moshe is already addressing a harsh historical and moral reality: He cannot, as an individual, solve the problem that he has encountered without first ascertaining that no agents of the secret police are in the vicinity. He is thereby forced to recognize the existence of an obtuse reality in which justice and righteousness are powerless to act without first ensuring that the long arm of the tyrant isn't around the corner.

The very recognition of this reality bears the seed of crisis. However, Moshe still believes at this stage, as he deals the Egyptian his due share of punishment, that the situation can be corrected. The full impact of the crisis hits him only the next day. It is only then that he understands the full extent of the problem facing him, and the difficulty of establishing justice upon earth. Prior to his departure from the palace to visit his brethren he had never imagined a reality in which one nation could be so oppressed and humiliated at the hands of cruel enemies. When he becomes aware of this reality, he assumes as self-evident that the oppressed nation will do everything in its power to rise up against its oppressors and fight against its bitter fate. However, upon encountering this socio-historical reality of Bnei Yisrael, he realizes that they have no will or inclination to rise against the situation. Rather he finds apathy and further injustice; apathy in the face of their situation, and injustice in their dealings amongst themselves. Historical reality is not perceived by them as something to be changed; they do not imagine such a possibility. From their point of view, the tyrant and the slavedriver are fixed and unchanging facts of life. History includes injustice, and a strong regime - like a strong animal in nature - will persecute and trample. If Moshe expected that his action on the first day would awaken his brothers to refuse to accept such a situation and arouse them to act, the second day causes him bitter disappointment. The cruel reality reveals itself to him as being more deeply rooted than he had realized.

The reaction of Bnei Yisrael to his actions, the disdain and scorn which they exhibited towards him, and his own consequent feeling of helplessness, coupled with a sense of the long arm of the tyrannical regime seeking to crush him, all come together to cause a great crisis in his sensitive soul. His despair of possibly influencing the historical sphere and his disappointment in Bnei Yisrael, who - were it not for their weakness - could effect a change, bring him to the brink of depression. He turns his back on the historical effort in general and those pertaining to the Jews in Egypt in particular. The Midrash Rabba (at the beginning of Parashat Va-et'hanan) points out

the profound significance of the words uttered by Yitro's daughters: "An EGYPTIAN man saved us from the shepherds", explaining that Moshe is identified in Midyan as an Egyptian and not as a Jewish fugitive. This points to Moshe's feeling of detachment from the historical fate of those who feel no compulsion to act in their own interests.

Moshe is still a youth. If his initial reaction was one of immediate and sharp protest, accompanied by attempts to save the persecuted, the other side of the coin is the crisis and despair he experiences when his efforts meet no success. If justice is not achieved immediately then despair and frustration set in at the inability of historical fulfillment especially in relation to those who do nothing to help themselves. Moshe lacks the character which recognizes the existence of a harsh reality but does not despair of correcting it by means of a stubborn and drawn-out battle which offers no overnight victories. He also is incapable of sensing empathy for the weak and downtrodden, broken in spirit. The same profound moral fervor leads him, in his early years, to a feeling of crisis, despair and detachment, which transforms his flight to Midyan from a journey forced upon him by historical circumstances into a self-imposed seclusion.

However, the story does not end here. Reaching Midyan, Moshe once again reveals kind-heartedness and moral sensitivity in saving Yitro's helpless daughters from the hands of the bullying shepherds. This incident, though, only serves to exacerbate his dejection. When he left Egypt his frustration and despair were directed towards the historical reality on the national level, but he did not harbor the same feelings regarding to human society on its elemental social level. He believed that human fraternity still had its place in society, and he meant to seclude himself only from the historical effort, not from life in human society altogether. "And he dwelt in the land of Midyan and he sat by the well." He chooses the well, the local meeting place, as his dwelling place. However, additional disappointment awaits him. Here, too, the strong oppress the weak, and here too in the social microcosm, morality and justice have no place, devoid though it may be of the pressures which existed in Egypt. The law of survival of the fittest prevails at all levels.

From the depths of his aching soul, Moshe decides to opt for a solipsistic existence. He leaves even the well and focuses on the limited family unit. Ultimately, as time goes on, we find him in an advanced stage of removal from involvement in human society and from any effort to correct the social historical reality of the world - "And he shepherded the sheep far into the desert."

"And he came to the mountain of the Lord, to Horev." His attempt at seclusion in the desert is undertaken in an attempt to find God. Not in the corrupt and aggressive human sowing to find God, but in the desert. There will he be able to seek Wisdom and spiritual fulfillment as he directs his attention to communion with God far from the corruption of human society.

Thus time rolls on. Moshe is engaged in seeking the God of truth and serving Him in the desert, as he attempts to scale the peaks of spiritual elevation. Yet, throughout these "many days" Bnei Yisrael are sighing and groaning because of the Egyptian oppression. "And it came to pass during those many days (i.e. during the time that Moshe dwelt in the desert of Midyan - see Rashi and Ramban), the king of Egypt died, and Bnei Yisrael sighed because of the labor, and they cried out, and their plea reached God because of the labor." Moshe is involved in serving his Creator and in delving into the fundamentals of wisdom; the suffering of his brethren has disappeared from his mind. Throughout these years, in response to the crisis he has undergone, he suppresses the feelings of pity and humane-moral indignation hidden in the depths of his soul.

Moshe though will be commanded to set aside his personal existential concerns and spiritual development in order to plunge into the depths of historical selflessness, with a firm belief in man's ability to change the harsh reality in which he finds himself. God Himself addresses him and calls upon him to act in order to redeem the oppressed nation; even if the nation is powerless to fight against those who enslave it. The whole purpose of the episode of the burning bush is to extract the future master-prophet from his solitary existence in the desert and to return him to the sphere of action on the historical-national level. God's words to him teach him that his personal quest for God is not sufficient so long as it is not accompanied by a recognition of the secret of the transformation from God's name as He is known (the Tetragrammaton) to "Ehyeh" - meaning the God who descends and is active in the midst of the human historical reality (see Rashi). From the heights of God's mountain, man is ordered to descend to the depths of the bush, and just as the God of Avraham, Yitzhak and Yaakov sees it fit to remove His Shekhinah, as it were, from His Throne of Glory in order to save His nation because He hears their cries and is aware of their suffering, so is it incumbent on His servant of flesh and blood to act likewise.

The entire description of the events at the burning bush revolve on this issue. Furthermore, it will continue to accompany the relationship between Moshe and the nation throughout the story of the enslavement and redemption in Sefer Shemot. However, the treatment of Moshe's recovery from his crisis in the wake of the

experience of the burning bush and his subsequent achievement of the epitome of spiritual elevation in Parashat KiTissa, as a result of his concern and supreme altruism for Bnei Yisrael during the crisis of the Egel - and not as a result of a solipsistic existence - require much more space than is allowed us here and therefore we have limited the discussion to the description of the actual crisis and no more.

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