

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash
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Moshe's Family
By Rav Amnon Bazak

I. Gershom and Eliezer

One of the most mysterious subjects in the Torah concerns Moshe's family. There is nothing strange about the fact that the text talks about this great leader of *Am Yisrael* more than it does about any other person. But it is specifically in light of the extensive documentation of his leadership career that the lack of details about the members of his family, and the mystery surrounding the very little that we are told, stands out even more starkly. We shall attempt here to extract what we can from what the text tells us about Tzipora, Gershom, and Eliezer, and perhaps also attain an understanding of why the discussion of these characters is so sparse and brief.

Let us begin with the new fact with which our *parasha* opens – the existence of Moshe's second son. Until now, we knew only of his first son, Gershom, who appeared on the scene in chapter 2: "And she [Tzipora] bore a son, and he called him Gershom, for he said: 'I was a stranger (*ger*) in a foreign land'"^[1] ([Shemot 2:22](#)). Gershom is mentioned again at the beginning of our *parasha*, but here the Torah adds that Moshe now has a second son:

And Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, took Tzipora, Moshe's wife – after he had sent her back – and her two sons, one of whom was named Gershom – for he had said, "I was a stranger in a foreign land," and the other who was named Eliezer, for "the God of my father was my help and delivered me from Pharaoh's sword." (18:2-4)

We learn much about Moshe from the names that he gives to his children. The name "Gershom" immediately arouses our curiosity, since the words "in a foreign land" refer to Midian, which is a foreign land to the Egyptian-born Moshe. It must be remembered that this name was given prior to God's revelation to Moshe, while Moshe – who had been raised by Pharaoh's daughter – behaved like an "Egyptian man" (2:19) for all intents and purposes, except for his national identification with the children of Israel. This name, then, expresses Moshe's connection with Egypt and his sorrow at having been forced to flee.

Eliezer, in contrast, appears to have been born after God's revelation, in which God presents Himself as "the God of your father, the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzchak, the God of Yaakov" (3:6). He goes on to command Moshe repeatedly (3:13-16) to present Him to *Am Yisraelas* "the God of your fathers." Apparently, then, the name Eliezer – commemorating the fact that "the God of my father helped me and delivered me from Pharaoh's sword" – was given against the backdrop of the revelation at the burning bush. This name expresses Moshe's

religious personality and his connection to God, which was solidified through that experience.

In any event, the most puzzling aspect of this mention of Moshe's two sons is that this is the last we hear of them; from this point onwards, the Torah records nothing about either Gershom or Eliezer, nor about Tzipora.^[2] What is the meaning of this silence? Why does the Torah ignore Moshe's family?

The absence of Moshe's family is felt most acutely in those narratives where we would expect to find them. In *Parashat Vaera*, for example, the story of God sending Moshe and Aharon to Pharaoh is interrupted with the genealogy of the family of Levi. The Torah lists Aharon's descendants as far as Pinchas, as well as the lineage of Korach, but there is not a word about Moshe's own children:

And the sons of Kehat were Amran and Yitzhar and Chevron and Uziel, and the years of the life of Kehat were a hundred and thirty-three years. And the sons of Merari were Machli and Mushi – these are the families of Levi by their generations. And Amram took Yocheved, his aunt, as a wife, and she bore him Aharon and Moshe, and the years of the life of Amram were a hundred and thirty-seven years. And the sons of Yitzhar were Korach and Nefeg and Zikhri. And the sons of Uziel were Mishael and Elitafan and Sitri. And Aharon took Elisheva, daughter of Aminadav – the sister of Nachshon – as a wife, and she bore him Nadav and Avihu and Elazar and Itamar. And the sons of Korach were Asir and Elkana and Aviasaf; these are the families of the Korchi. And Elazar, son of Aharon, took a wife from the daughters of Putiel, and she bore him Pinchas – these are the heads of the fathers of the Levites by their families. These are [the same] Aharon and Moshe to whom God said, "Bring the children of Israel out of Egypt by their hosts." (6:18-26)

Another such passage is to be found at the beginning of *Sefer Bamidbar*. Following the census of *Bnei Yisrael*, the Torah records the special census of the tribe of Levi. The passage opens with the words, "These are the generations of Aharon and Moshe on the day God spoke to Moshe at Mount Sinai" ([Bamidbar 3:1](#)), but the continuation fails to supply the information we expect to read:

And these are the names of the sons of Aharon: the firstborn, Nadav, and Avihu, Elazar, and Itamar. These are the names of the sons of Aharon, the anointed priests who were consecrated to serve. And Nadav and Avihu died before God while offering a strange fire before God in the wilderness of Sinai, and they had no sons, so [only] Elazar and Itamar served as priests in the sight of Aharon, their father. ([Bamidbar 3:2-4](#))

Here too, the Torah ignores Moshe's descendants, listing only the descendants of Aharon. How are we to understand this?

II. "After He Had Sent Her Back"

An important clue to understanding the phenomenon would seem to lie in the enigmatic "sending back" of Tziphora, noted in the beginning of our *parasha*: "And Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, took Tziphora, Moshe's wife – after he had sent her back (*le-achar shilucheha*)..." (18:2). What does this mean? Nowhere until now did we hear anything of this, but apparently at some point, Tziphora had parted from Moshe and returned with her sons to Midian. Moreover, the term "*shilucheha*" seems to indicate a form of divorce, as we find in *Sefer Devarim*:

When a man takes a woman and marries her, and it happens that she does not find favor in his eyes, for he has found some unseemliness in her, and he writes her a bill of divorce and gives it into her hand, and sends her away (*ve-shilcha*) from his home, then she shall depart from his home, and may go and be married to another man. And if the latter husband comes to hate her, and writes her a bill of divorce and gives it into her hand, and sends her away (*ve-shilcha*) from his home, or if the latter husband who took her as a wife, dies, then her first husband, who had sent her away, may not take her back as a wife... ([Devarim 24:1-4](#)).

With this possibility in mind, Ibn Ezra writes in his short commentary on the above verse concerning Tziphora having been "sent back:" "Some say that 'after she was sent back' means 'to her father's home, from the road to Egypt,' while others interpret this to mean that [Moshe] gave her a divorce."

Either way, what is certain is that at some point in time Moshe had "sent" Tziphora, and her sons had gone with her. What were the circumstances of this "sending"?

Seemingly, the explanation must have something to do with the sole incident known to us from the period of their marriage – the mysterious drama that takes place on the way to Egypt, at the lodge:

And it was, on the way, at the lodge, that God met him and sought to kill him. And Tziphora took a sharp stone and cut off her son's foreskin, and cast it at his feet, and said, "For you are a bloody bridegroom to me." And He let him go, then she said, "A bloody bridegroom in the matter of circumcision." (4:24-26)

We shall not attempt here to address all aspects of this cryptic narrative. For our purposes, what is important is that after God sought to harm Moshe and Tziphora saved him by circumcising her son, she twice calls Moshe a "bloody bridegroom" (*chatan damim*).^[3] This expression is enigmatic in itself, and many different interpretations have been offered, but its general mood seems to be negative, as in the somewhat similar words that Shim'i, son of Gera, directs to David: "Behold, you are in an evil situation, because you are a man of blood (*ish damim*)" (*Shmuel II* 16:8). Tziphora seems to be telling Moshe that living with him involves mortal danger, and perhaps also that she is not willing to live such a life. In response, Moshe sends her back to her father's home in Midian.

The connection between this incident at the lodge and the beginning of our *parasha* is clear. Our *parasha* describes Yitro's arrival and his welcome by Moshe:

And Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law and his sons and his wife, came to Moshe, to the wilderness where he was encamped, at the mountain of God... And Moshe came to meet his father-in-law, and he prostrated himself and he kissed him, and they asked each other as to their welfare, and he came into the tent. (18:5-7)

This description is strongly reminiscent of what we read immediately after the incident at the lodge:

And God said to Aharon: "Go to meet Moshe, to the wilderness;" and he went and he met him at the mountain of God, and he kissed him. (4:27)

In both instances, a close relative of Moshe goes to the mountain of God (which is Sinai) in the wilderness in order to meet him, and the warm encounter includes a kiss. These two meetings seem to form a circle which begins with Moshe's first experiences after the confrontation with Tziphora, following which she had returned to Midian, and concludes with their reunion.

We must now ask what led to Tziphora's return, with her sons, to Moshe. Here, the answer is explicitly provided:

When Yitro – the priest of Midian, father-in-law of Moshe – heard all that God had done for Moshe and for Israel, His people; that God had brought Israel out of Egypt... (18:1)^[4]

Yitro's amazement at the events of the Exodus prompt him to return to Moshe, who recounts to him "all that God had done to Pharaoh and to Egypt" (18:8), until Yitro declares, "Now I know that God is greater than all gods, for in the matter in which they prided themselves, He was superior to them" (ibid. 11). Yitro, whose spiritual greatness we have discussed previously (see the *shiur* on *Parashat Shemot*), completes his spiritual journey with recognition of God's Kingship and bequeaths to *Am Yisrael* an orderly system of justice, as we read later on.

Perhaps we might suggest that from the time that Moshe left Midian for Egypt, Yitro was left in a state of suspense, waiting to hear what would come of the campaign and which side would emerge victorious. For this reason, he refrained from any attempt to return Tziphora and her sons to Moshe.^[5] Once he heard the great events of the Exodus, he decided to renew his connection with Moshe.

III. The Results

What remains to be clarified is the question of whether Tziphora and her sons experienced the same spiritual transformation that had been experienced by Yitro, or whether life in Midian had molded them in a different direction. It would seem that this very issue is addressed by the Torah's silence. The complete absence of Tziphora, Gershom, and Eliezer from this point onwards seems to indicate that the three of them were not fully integrated amongst *Am Yisrael*; they played no active part in Moshe's conduct.^[6] Moreover, Moshe took another wife, in addition to Tziphora – the "Kushite woman."^[7]

We therefore conclude that Moshe paid a heavy price for the severance from his wife and sons for a lengthy period – and especially during that period in which the national identity

of *Am Yisrael* was being formed. His wife and sons were not present at the time of the Exodus, nor did they experience the splitting of the sea, concerning which we are told, "Israel saw the great work which God had done to Egypt, and the people feared God, and they believed in God and in Moshe, His servant" (14:31). They no doubt heard of these events, as Yitro did, but the impact of the hearing was not like that of seeing it themselves. For this reason, even when they stood amongst *Am Yisrael* at the Revelation at Sinai, they were not full partners in the collective experience of internalizing the words, "I am the Lord your God Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (20:2) – because they had never themselves been in the "house of slavery," nor had they been taken from there with great strength and an outstretched arm.

The text offers us one further clue to what happened to Moshe's family – the gruesome story of the "idol of Mikha" ([Shoftim 17-18](#)). Towards the end of the story, we discover the name of the Levite youth who had served as priest to the idol that Mikha had fashioned:

And the children of Dan set up the idol; and Yehonatan, son of Gershom, son of Menashe – he and his sons were priests to the tribe of Dan until the day of the captivity of the land. ([Shoftim 18:30](#))

The letter *nun* in the name Menashe is traditionally written as a "superscript." Rashi comments:

Out of respect for Moshe, the *nun* is added so as to change his name. And [the letter *nun*] is written hanging to teach that [his father] was not Menashe, but rather Moshe.

The source for Rashi's explanation is the *gemara* (*Bava Batra* 109a and elsewhere), where Yehonatan is identified as the son of Gershom, son of Moshe. According to Rashi, then, the *nun* is added to Moshe's name out of respect for him, but in truth the Yehonatan and his progeny who ministered to this idol for several generations were Moshe's very own descendants. This certainly makes sense in light of our discussion above.

We might ask: If the text takes care to protect Moshe's honor, why did *Chazal* reveal the secret and thereby bring him dishonor? Is our discussion above not a further desecration of Moshe's memory? It would seem that what *Chazal* are teaching is that on one hand, we must indeed take care to maintain Moshe's honor; at the same time, the awareness of the fate of his descendants is a message that we dare not ignore. It is only thus that we may understand and internalize the colossal tragedy of the greatest of the prophets, the teacher of all of Israel, Moshe Rabbeinu. By taking on God's mission to lead Israel out of Egypt, this great leader paid a huge personal price. Was this the inevitable price that the greatest leaders of *Am Yisrael* must necessarily pay, or could things have been done differently? Can we really arrive at an answer to this question?

Translated by Kaeren Fish

Tzipora: "The shepherds came and drove them away (*vayegarshum*), but Moshe arose and helped them, and he watered their flock" (2:17).

^[2] This is assuming that the "Kushite woman" mentioned in *Sefer Bamidbar* (12:1) is not Tzipora, as Rashbam maintains (as opposed to Rashi).

^[3] Rashi understands the appellation as being addressed to the angel of God: "You are a [thwarted] killer of my husband to me." However, it is difficult to justify a literal understanding of the words "a bloody bridegroom" as "a killer of my husband."

^[4] Rashi cites *Chazal's* comment: "What was it that he heard about, which prompted his arrival? The splitting of the Reed Sea and the war against Amalek."

^[5] From this perspective, Yitro's conduct resembles that attributed by the *midrash* to Haran: "Haran's heart was divided, and he retained his father's words. All the people came to him and said, 'Whose side are you on?' He said to himself, 'Avraham is greater than I; if I see that he has managed to escape, I shall say – 'I am with Avraham.' If not, I shall say, 'I am with you'" (*Midrash Tehillim* 118, 11).

^[6] Indeed, the possibility that Moshe's sons would take their father's place after his death never arises. This is especially apparent against the backdrop of the numerous parallels between Moshe and Shmuel, as discussed at length in my *shiurim* to *Sefer Shmuel* (as well as in the first chapter of my book, *Makbilot Nifgashot – Makbilot Sifrutiyot be-Sefer Shmuel* [Alon Shevut, 5766]). While Shmuel hints at the possibility that his sons might succeed him (see [Shmuel II 12:2](#)), Moshe appears convinced that in his own case there is nothing to discuss.

Nevertheless, surprisingly, the *midrash* criticizes Moshe viewing his request that God appoint a leader to succeed him as a veiled hint at the possibility of his sons take his place: "After the daughters of Tzelofchad inherited their father's estate, Moshe said: 'Now is the time for me to ask for what I want. If daughters can inherit, then surely it is lawful that my sons inherit my honor.' God said to Moshe: 'He who watches over the fig tree shall eat its fruits' ([Mishlei 27:18](#)). Your sons sat [idle] and did not engage in Torah; Yehoshua, who ministered to you, is worthy of ministering to Israel..." (*Tanchuma Pinchas, parasha* 11). Why do *Chazal* attribute such a thought to Moshe when there is no hint of it in the text? Nechama Leibowitz, *Iyunim be-Sefer Bamidbar* (Jerusalem, 5756), p. 328, writes: "This was not the manner in which our verse was explained by *Chazal*, the Sages of the Midrash, who often viewed the narratives of the Torah not as one-time, transient events, but rather as archetypes of human phenomena which are always recurring; not as that which transpired then, but rather as that which is always repeating itself and happening before our very eyes. Within even the greatest of the great they perceived man in all his weakness and nakedness; the desires of the heart and the human inclinations..."

^[7] See note 2 above.

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^[1] The context may also hint at another meaning of the name; it recalls the incident which led to Moshe's marriage to