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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT SHEMOT

Dedicated in memory of my grandmother, Szore bat Simen Leib Berkowitz z”l,
whose *yahrzeit* is on the 18th of Tevet.

May her soul be among the righteous in Gan Eden.

**Moshe's Identity Struggle
Which Child Was Not Circumcised, and Why?***

By Rav Yoel Bin Nun

Who was Moshe in the early part of his life – in his own eyes, in the eyes of his surroundings (in Egypt/in the wilderness), in the eyes of his people, and in the eyes of the Torah?

Was he Moshe the son of (Amram) a man from the house of Levi? Moshe the son of (Batya?¹) the daughter of Pharaoh? Moshe the son of (Yocheved) the daughter of Levi? Moshe the brother of Aharon and Miriam? Moshe the son-in-law of Yitro and the husband of Tzipora? (He was, of course, not yet Moshe the man of God, the servant of God, Moshe Rabbeinu).

And there went a man of the house of Levi, and took to wife a daughter of Levi. And the woman conceived, and bore a son... She took for him an ark of bulrushes... And his sister stood afar off... And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the river... “This is one of the Hebrews' children.” Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, “Shall I go and call you a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for you?” And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, “Go.” And the maiden went and called the child's mother... And the child grew, and she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. And she called his name Moshe, and said, “Because I drew him out of the water.” (2:1-10)

Why does the Torah describe Moshe as an anonymous figure? Why does it not open with the name of his father and the name of his mother, in the

* Unless indicated otherwise, all Biblical references are to the book of *Shemot*.

¹ See I *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 4:18; *Vayikra Rabba*, *parasha* 1 (ed. Margoliot, p. 8); *Megilla* 13a; *Sanhedrin* 19b.

style of the book of *Bereishit*? Why does it not mention his sister's name? Surely they are all known to us from other places in the Torah!

It seems that the Torah wishes to leave Moshe in a total darkness of identity. It suffices to compare these opening verses to the genealogical account in *Parashat Va'era*: "And Amram took him Yocheved, his father's sister, as a wife; and she bore him Aharon and Moshe..." (6:20); or to the second census, carried out for the purpose of allocating the tribal territories, in the book of *Bamidbar*: "And the name of Amram's wife was Yocheved, the daughter of Levi, who was born to Levi in Egypt; and she bore to Amram Aharon and Moshe, and Miriam their sister" (*Bamidbar* 26:59).

In light of the continuation and the end of the chapter, which deal with the life of Moshe in the house of Pharaoh and in the house of Reuel, in Egypt and in the wilderness, the Torah's primary purpose in this chapter seems to be to raise the question of Moshe's identity, given that he was born and raised in such an exceptional manner.

The second half of the chapter that opens with the birth of Moshe certainly deals with the question of identity:

And it came to pass in those days, when Moshe was grown up, that he went out to his brothers, and looked on their burdens; and he saw an Egyptian smiting a Hebrew, one of his brothers. (2:11)

Twice the Torah reiterates the words "his brothers." The result – Pharaoh's desire to kill Moshe – is only understandable in light of the fact that Moshe remained a "Hebrew" in his consciousness and knew very well who "his brothers" were and what they were experiencing.² Moshe was also identified as a Hebrew by those in his environment, as we see in the argument between the two Hebrews: "Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Do you think to kill me, as you killed the Egyptian?" (2:14). In the killing of the Egyptian, he even stood up against Pharaoh's decree and against his rule.

How did Moshe remain a Hebrew in the house of Pharaoh "in those days"? This is not something that the Torah tells us. The biblical story has the character of a skeletal novel, packed with verbs that describe the events in a most concise manner,³ without describing the background and landscape, and without lengthy musings and explanations. The *midrashim* of *Chazal* complete the stories of the Bible in different directions, but they too usually maintain their characteristic brevity.

² This is the meaning of the emphasis in the verse: "And he looked on their burdens." See *Shemot Rabba* 1:27 (ed. Shinan, p. 85).

³ For example, the Torah does not tell us what befell the Israelites in Egypt prior to the decrees issued by Pharaoh, except for their rapid multiplication. (Chapter 1 in the book of *Shemot* covers a period of 130 years, according to the calculations of *Chazal* in *Seder Olam Rabba*, chap. 3). Nor does it tell us anything about what happened to Moshe during the years that he grew up in the house of Pharaoh.

Three different possibilities come to mind: a) Pharaoh's daughter revealed to Moshe his identity, and perhaps even maintained secret contact with his mother.⁴ b) The Egyptian princes, perhaps even with Pharaoh's cooperation, made sure that Moshe knew who he was and who he was not, so that he would not contemplate competing for power.⁵ c) Over the years, Moshe figured this out on his own from various hints⁶ (which are also connected to the first two explanations).

Each explanation would make a novel in itself, and the possible connections between the three make it possible to write a magnificent novel centered exclusively around this question, the first stage of Moshe's struggle with his identity. Moshe grew up in Pharaoh's house, but he was not an Egyptian man.⁷

How, then, did Moshe become an "Egyptian man" in the minds of the daughters of the priest of Midyan? The simple answer – based on his clothing. It seems, however, that the plain meaning is not enough here, as is the case in many places in the Bible. The daughters' description of Moshe as an "Egyptian man" is totally contrary to the reason for his arrival in Midyan, for he came in the wake of his escape from Egypt after having saved a "Hebrew, one of his brothers" by killing "an Egyptian" smiting a Hebrew. It is difficult to ignore these two opposite meanings of the expression "Egyptian man" in this story.

Chazal's interpretation of this expression is indeed directed at this, and it denies Moshe the title of "an Egyptian man":⁸

Was Moshe an Egyptian? Rather his clothing was Egyptian, while he was a Hebrew. Another explanation:... This is what the daughters of Yitro said to Moshe: Well done, that you have rescued us from the shepherds. Moshe said to them: That very Egyptian whom I killed, it is he who rescued you. Therefore, they said to their father: "An Egyptian man." That is to say: Who brought about that he would come to us? The Egyptian man that he killed.⁹

⁴ *Chazal* expounded the verse in I *Divrei Ha-Yamim* (4:18) as alluding to the fact that Batya the daughter of Pharaoh rejected her father's idols and continued to raise Moshe as his mother had done – "Yocheved gave birth [to him] and Batya raised [him]," to the point that he is called "her son." See *Sanhedrin* 19b; *Megilla* 13a; *Shemot Rabba* 1:23 (ed. Shinan, p. 75).

⁵ See *Shemot Rabba* 1:26 (ed. Shinan, p. 83): "And Pharaoh's magicians sat and said: We fear this one [the boy Moshe] who takes your crown and sets it on his head..."

⁶ This is what happened to many Jews in the generation of the Holocaust and the rebirth of the State of Israel, especially among the Jews of the Soviet Union.

⁷ In my opinion, this is the meaning of the verse: "And it came to pass in those days, when Moshe was grown up, that he went out to **his brothers**, and looked on **their burdens**; and he saw an Egyptian smiting a Hebrew, one of **his brothers**." Therefore, I cannot accept the view that Moshe was an Egyptian prince, and it was only in the wake of his involvement in the rescue of the smitten Hebrew that he revealed his identity and ethnicity.

⁸ In clear opposition to the exposition of R. Yehuda HaNasi in the continuation there.

⁹ *Shemot Rabba* 1:32 (ed. Shinan, p. 96).

When Moshe fled from Egypt, the consciousness of his identity remained in that country, together with his enslaved brothers. In the house of Pharaoh, Moshe fought the royal family for his identity, and identified with his brothers "in their burdens," whereas in the land of Midyan he found himself far away from both his brothers and his country, and his identity was put to a most difficult test.

Just as Pharaoh's daughter saved Moshe from the waters of the Nile and the house of Pharaoh was his refuge, so too the house of the priest of Midyan was his refuge when he was destitute and persecuted. What would have been more natural at that time, "in the course of those many days" (2:23),¹⁰ than Moshe's full integration into his father-in-law's house, to the point of assimilating into his family and the people of Midyan?

But Moshe proclaimed his intention to preserve his identity, when he named his eldest son "Gershom, for he said: **I have been a stranger in a strange land**" (2:23). And when he eventually received his mission from God, he said to "Yeter his father-in-law...: Let me go, I pray you, and return to **my brothers that are in Egypt**, and see whether they be yet alive" (4:18). Moshe's identity remained anchored in his brothers in Egypt and in no other connection, not even in the land of the Hebrews (the land of the Patriarchs), which was not his birth place and with which he was not familiar. Similarly, his second son, who was born in Midyan, Moshe called "Eliezer, for the God of my father was my help and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh" (18:4). This second declaration confirms that Moshe's identity remained connected to the God of his father and his rescue. Moshe left no room for any other identity.

Moshe's declaration when he named his firstborn son means only one thing: In the house of Pharaoh, I did not become an Egyptian, but rather I preserved my identity and my identification with my suffering Hebrew brothers. So too, in the land of Midyan, I did not become a Midyanite! Not for the sake of my dear father-in-law, who gave me a house, a wife, and a family, and not for the sake of my wife, who lived all her life in the land of Midyan. My firstborn son, who is also the firstborn of his mother Tzipora, will be called after his distant brothers, whom he and his mother know not at all. And with his name he will bear the consciousness of his temporary dwelling in the land of Midyan, a welcoming land of refuge, but nevertheless "a strange land."

How did Yitro, Tzipora, and the rest of the family and Midyanites receive this declaration of Moshe? Once again, the Torah does not tell us! They may have become angry, or they may have received Moshe, the strange foreigner, with acceptance and honor. It is also possible that Moshe went to tend "the flock of Yitro his father-in-law, the priest of Midyan... to the farthest end of the wilderness" (3:1) in order to distance himself from this tension. In the meantime, Yitro and Tzipora raised "Gershom," whose name contradicted

¹⁰ Moshe was 80 years old when he stood before Pharaoh, and a relatively young man when he had run away to Midyan. In *Shemot Rabba* 1:27 (ed. Shinan, p. 84), the Sages disagree as to whether he was then 20 or 40.

all that was dear and precious to them, with all the difficulties that awaited a child who grew up in such an atmosphere.

Here we must ask a question of central importance: Did Gershom undergo circumcision in his foreign land? Most of the *midrashim* and most of the commentators¹¹ assume that Gershom was in fact circumcised and that the son who had not been circumcised, whom Tzipora circumcised and saved "on the way at the inn," was Eliezer, the second son who was born just prior to the journey to Egypt, but had not been circumcised because of the impending journey. This may be alluded to by the wording of the text: "And Moshe took his wife and his sons, and set them upon an ass, and he returned to the land of Egypt" (4:20), as this is the first verse that mentions Moshe's second son, without mentioning his name.

According to this approach, a difficult conflict is created here between the covenant of the Patriarchs and the exodus from Egypt:

It was taught: R. Yehoshua ben Korcha said: Great is circumcision, for all the meritorious deeds performed by Moshe our teacher did not stand for him when he neglected circumcision,¹² as it is written: "And the Lord met him, and sought to kill him" (4:24).

Rabbi [Yehuda Ha-Nasi] said: God forbid that Moses should have neglected circumcision! But he reasoned thus: If I circumcise [my son] and [straightway] go forth [on my mission to Pharaoh], I will endanger his life... If I circumcise him, and tarry three days — but the Holy One, blessed be He, has commanded: "Go, return to Egypt" (4:19). Why then was Moses punished? Because he busied himself first with the inn, as it is stated: "And it came to pass on the way in the inn" (4:23). (*Nedarim* 31b)

According to R. Yehuda Ha-Nasi (and also according to Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, cited later in the passage), Moshe was faced with a serious conflict between circumcising his newborn infant and carrying out his mission to save Israel from Egypt — that is to say, between "the covenant of the Patriarchs" and "the exodus from Egypt." Moshe decided in favor of setting out on his mission together with his wife and children;¹³ he pushed off

¹¹ R. Saadya Gaon, R. Shemuel ben Chofni, Rabbeinu Chananel, Rashi, the Chizkuni, Ibn Ezra, and Ramban, and the rest of the more recent commentators in their wake. They disagree only on the question of whether Moshe was there at that time and whether the angel of God wished to kill Moshe or the child, just as the Sages disagreed about this in the *gemara*.

¹² In the *mishna* there, the reading is as follows: "Judgment was not suspended for Moshe the righteous one for even an hour."

¹³ Rashbam and Chizkuni maintain that from the outset Moshe should have left his wife with his circumcised son in Midyan, and it was for this reason that he was punished for the fact that his mission was delayed for personal matters, such as the matter of the inn. Had he gone by himself from the outset, as he did in the end, his mission would not have been delayed. A similar approach is found in *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael, masekhta de-Amalek, Yitro* section 1 (ed. Horwitz-Rabin, p. 191), which writes that Aharaon said to Moshe when they met at the Mountain of God: "About the first ones, we are distressed." In other words, do not bring additional family members to Egypt, as there are already enough people enslaved there.

the circumcision because of the danger of traveling before the wound is healed. However, this putting off of the circumcision itself became a mortal danger, because Moshe set the circumcision as secondary not only to the mission, but also to his making arrangements for the night. It was precisely Tzipora who understood this and circumcised the child.

But this makes no sense at all. Surely all of Israel who were born "in the wilderness by the way as they came forth out of Egypt, had not been circumcised, for the children of Israel walked forty years in the wilderness..." (*Yehoshua* 5:5-6), and Yehoshua had to remove the "reproach of Egypt" from them when they entered the Land of Israel (*Yehoshua* 5:2-9). Is it reasonable to say that all of this "neglect," for which Moshe was responsible, is understandable and was not punished, because it was dangerous to undergo circumcision on the road, in the wilderness, whereas concerning the circumcision of his son – before the giving of the Torah – Moshe was punished for having "busied himself first with the inn"?

Indeed, the *Targum Yerushalmi* (4:25), and similarly the *midrash* cited in *Yalkut Shimoni* (*Shemot* 167, ed. Mossad HaRav Kook, p. 45), explain that **the child who had not been circumcised was Moshe's firstborn, Gershom.**¹⁴ This was because of an agreement and oath made with Yitro, that the first child would be raised by Yitro in his own way, and the second child would be brought up by Moshe (*va-yo'el Moshe* – in the sense of an *ala* – an oath).¹⁵ Therefore, Gershom was not circumcised. According to this opinion, Moshe was guilty of years of "negligence" concerning circumcision, and abandonment of his firstborn son to an education that included idolatry.¹⁶

This too, however, is a puzzling *midrash*. The Midyanites are descendants of Ketura (as is stated explicitly in *Bereishit* 25:1-4), and they practiced circumcision even more so than did the descendants of Yishmael.¹⁷

¹⁴ The *Targum Yerushalmi* is "the Targum of *Eretz Yisrael*" from the days of the Geonim. It is not *Targum Yonatan*, for *Targum Yonatan ben Uziel* was written only on the Prophets (see *Megilla* 3a). The acronym T"Y caused the misidentification. The *Targum* to this verse reads: "And it came to pass on the way at the inn, that the angel of the Lord met him and sought to kill him, because of Gershom his son whom he did not circumcise, because of the deal made with Yitro, who did not allow him to be circumcised; but Eliezer was circumcised, in accordance with the condition stipulated between them."

¹⁵ So also Shadal in his commentary to *Shemot* 4:24; see also Y. Blau, "*Chatan Damim*," *Tarbiz* 26 (1957), pp. 1-3 (whose explanation is similar to our explanation). In my opinion, this explanation is intended to explain the difficult historical outcome of religious deviation among the descendants of Gershom, as opposed to the flowering of the descendants of Eliezer who "were very many." See *Shofetim* 18:30, as opposed to I *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 23:15-17.

¹⁶ We already find this in *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael, masekhta de-Amalek, Yitro*, sec. 1 (ed. Horwitz-Rabin, p. 191), in the words of R. Elazar Ha-Moda'i. This is as opposed to other *midrashim*, according to which Yitro abandoned idolatry even before Moshe had an impact upon him; he was therefore banned by the Midyanites, and his daughters had to tend his flocks on their own, and they were attacked by the shepherds. See *Shemot Rabba* 1:32 (ed. Shinan, pp. 94-95).

¹⁷ See *Sanhedrin* 59b. The Rambam (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 10:7-8) ruled that the descendants of Ketura are obligated to undergo circumcision on the eighth day, just like the descendants of Yitzchak, since they are descendants of Avraham after Yitzchak and after the command about circumcision was given to Avraham and his descendants. This is in contrast to the

Indeed, we see that Tzipora knew how to circumcise, and she saved the child's life through circumcision. Had Gershom been handed over to Yitro and Tzipora for his education, he should have been circumcised years earlier!

This question can be resolved if we understand that the Midyanites performed circumcision for the sake of belonging to the seed of Avraham by way of Ketura,¹⁸ so that circumcising Moshe's eldest son in the house of the priest of Midyan would have turned him, as well as Moshe his father and Tzipora his mother, into a Midyanite family. This is precisely what Moshe fought against, as he had declared when he named the child. Moshe could not have fulfilled the covenant of the Patriarchs in Midyan, when it would clearly have meant becoming a Midyanite. It would have been impossible to perform circumcision there as if the child were part of the people of Israel!

According to this understanding, it was precisely Moshe's struggle to preserve his identity that prevented him from circumcising his son in a "foreign land," while his wife and father-in-law dearly wished to circumcise the child. Only the child's name prevented them,¹⁹ for it was a declaration of Moshe's struggle against circumcision as a sign of Midyanite identity.²⁰

Now we can attempt a fresh reading of this difficult passage concerning Tzipora's circumcision of her son by the way in the inn:

And Moshe went and returned to Yitro his father-in-law, and said to him, "Let me go, I pray you, and return to my brothers that are in Egypt, and see whether they be yet alive." And Yitro said to Moshe, "Go in peace." And the Lord said to Moshe in Midyan, "Go, return to Egypt; for all the men are dead that sought your life." And Moshe took his wife and his sons, and set them upon an ass, and he returned to the land of Egypt; and Moshe took the rod of God in his hand. And the Lord said to Moshe, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the wonders which I have put in your hand; but I will harden his heart, and he will not let the people go. And you shall say to Pharaoh: Thus says the Lord, Israel is My son, My firstborn. And I have said to

descendants of Yishmael, who are not obligated to undergo circumcision, unless they become intermingled with the descendants of Ketura.

¹⁸ The *gemara* and the Rambam (cited in the previous note) state that the descendants of Ketura are obligated in circumcision like Jews, on the eighth day – that is to say, as a covenant of family identity. Therefore, I do not accept Shadal's opinion regarding our passage, that Tzipora had persuaded Moshe to circumcise the child only at the age of 13, like the Yishmaelites. It can, of course, be argued that the descendants of Ketura and the family of Yitro in particular conducted themselves like the descendants of Yishmael, and not in accordance with the Halakha as formulated in the *gemara* and in the Rambam. However, their closeness to the people of Israel, unlike the descendants of Yishmael, strengthens my argument that the law governing the Yishmaelites was different than that governing the Midyanites. It was not Tzipora who pushed off her son's circumcision, but rather Moshe, and the child's name proves this.

¹⁹ A name bears significance similar to the obligation undertaken through an oath. A person like Yitro would not have violated such an obligation.

²⁰ It cannot be argued that circumcision is a *mitzva* in any situation, for the Torah had not yet been given at Mount Sinai, and even after it was given, circumcision for the sake of idolatry or foreign identity is certainly forbidden!

you: Let My son go, that he may serve Me; and you have refused to let him go. Behold, I will slay your son, your firstborn." And it came to pass on the way at the inn, that the Lord met him, and sought to kill him. Then Tzipora took a flint, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet; and she said, "Surely a bridegroom of blood are you to me." So He let him alone. Then she said, "A bridegroom of blood in regard of the circumcision." (4:18-26)

The greatest difficulty in this obscure passage is not which son was not circumcised, nor which person God wished to kill, Moshe or the infant, but rather the two verses that warn here about the plague of the firstborn, and the fact that this is mentioned in one succession, together with "And it came to pass on the way at the inn." It is clear where these verses belong – in chapter 11, after verse 1, where they are truly missing!²¹ In that chapter, Moshe says to Pharaoh: "Thus says the Lord, About midnight will I go into the midst of Egypt; and all the firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die..." (11:4-5), while God's words to Moshe are not found there. These words are mentioned in our passage: "And you shall say to Pharaoh: **Thus says the Lord, Israel is My son, My firstborn. And I have said to you: Let My son go, that he may serve Me; and you have refused to let him go. Behold, I will slay your son, your firstborn**" (4:22-23). This statement completes the word of God to Moshe concerning the plague of the firstborn and its special significance. It is missing in chapter 11, and inserted in chapter 4 without any understandable context! Moshe has not yet met Pharaoh even once, and Pharaoh has not yet refused anything. Why are these verses found in chapter 4, without even a space separating it from the passage concerning the circumcision in the inn?

This is not similar to a clear statement about the future, like that made to Moshe at the burning bush: "And I know that the king of Egypt will not give you leave to go, except by a mighty hand. And I will put forth My hand, and smite Egypt with all My wonders which I will do in the midst thereof. And after that he will let you go" (3:19-20). There is an announcement like this in our passage as well: "But I will harden his heart, and he will not let the people go" (4:21), but the wording of the next verses is different: "And I have said to you: Let My son go, that he may serve Me; and you have refused to let him go..." (4:23). This is not an announcement of what will happen in the future,²² but rather guidelines given to Moshe as to what he should say in his argument with Pharaoh after the plagues and before the final resolution.²³

²¹ Reading these verses in chapter 11 after verse 1 also resolves all the difficulties that arise there (see Ibn Ezra's long commentary). These verses are the natural continuation of God's statement at the beginning of chapter 11: "Yet one plague more will I bring upon Pharaoh, and upon Egypt..." and they connect well with what is stated there in verse 2, about speaking in the ears of the people about borrowing silver vessels and gold vessels, in the same context as this was mentioned at the burning bush (3:21-22).

²² Ramban in his commentary (4:21-23) comments on the difficulty: "It is possible that 'And you shall say to Pharaoh' is **information**, that He will command him to say this to him **in the end**... and you shall say to him **on that day**: 'Behold, I will slay your son, your firstborn,' and then he will send them out. For we do not find that He informed him about the death of their firstborn other than at this time, and the statement is not all for now."

²³ Verses like this appear over the course of the plagues, generally before a transition to the next level: 7:16, 26-27; 8:16-17; 9:1-2, 13-17; 10:3-4.

While these verses are part of the warning about the plague of the firstborn, they were inserted earlier in the passage dealing with the circumcision at the inn in order to teach us the significance of circumcision, which is a condition for the Paschal offering and for redemption from the land of Egypt. This is the circumcision of **"My son, My firstborn Israel,"** as opposed to the plague that afflicted **"your son, your firstborn"** of Pharaoh. This is understandable only if the uncircumcised son was the firstborn, and not his younger brother. "Your son, your firstborn" of Pharaoh stands against "My son, My firstborn, Israel," **and also against Moshe's firstborn who had not been circumcised.** This is not a punishment meted out against Moshe, as there is no mention here of any sin. Rather, this is **a sign concerning circumcision,** which delays the exodus from Egypt of "My son, My firstborn, Israel," just as it delays the mission of Moshe. This sign was given specifically through the firstborn of Moshe, because his brothers in Egypt were circumcised²⁴ and their identity was clear.

This sign, given by (the angel of) the Lord to Moshe ("and He sought to kill him") with the blood of the covenant of "the bridegroom of blood," parallels, of course, the Destroyer who will not strike at the people of Israel, by virtue of the blood on the lintel and two doorposts at the entrance to the house during the plague of the firstborn (12:13, 23). It reflects the well-known idea of "In your blood, live" (*Yechezkel* 16:6, in anticipation of the covenant with God) – the blood of the Paschal offering and the blood of circumcision.²⁵

It seems that most of the Israelites in Egypt underwent circumcision by virtue of the covenant of the Patriarchs; only a few had to circumcise themselves in anticipation of the Paschal sacrifice. Therefore, the obligation to circumcise is mentioned in the framework of the law of the Paschal offering (12:44-48), and it establishes that the Paschal offering is contingent on circumcision – "But no uncircumcised person shall eat thereof." Not only is the uncircumcised person himself forbidden to eat of the Paschal offering, because he is not part of the congregation of Israel in practice, but the circumcision of all members of the household,²⁶ including the slaves, hinders the head of the household from eating of the sacrifice, as taught by *Chazal*.²⁷

²⁴ If most of the Israelites had not been circumcised, the Torah should have described a mass circumcision event before the Pesach celebrated in Egypt, just as is described in the book of *Yehoshua* (5:2-9) the mass circumcision event before the Pesach celebrated in Gilgal, when the people of Israel entered the land of Israel. So it follows also from the words of *Chazal* (*Sota* 12b; *Shemot Rabba* 1:29 [ed. Shinan, p. 78]) that the daughter of Pharaoh identified Moshe and said, "This is one of the Hebrews' children" (2:6), based on the fact that "she saw that he had been circumcised."

²⁵ See *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael, masekhta pischa, Bo, parasha 5* (ed. Horwitz-Rabin, p. 14).

²⁶ It was already stated about Avraham: "And Avraham took Yishmael his son, and all that were born in his house, and all that were bought with his money, every male among the men of Avraham's house, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin in the selfsame day, as God had said unto him" (*Bereishit* 17:23).

²⁷ See *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael, masekhta de-pischa, Bo, parasha 15* (ed. Horwitz-Rabin, p. 53).

The Torah advanced the warning regarding the plague of the firstborn and its significance to the passage concerning the circumcision of Moshe's firstborn because only there does the connection between the saving blood of the covenant of the Patriarchs to the saving blood of the Paschal offering come to expression – and precisely with one who had been so detached from his people and his brothers that he could not circumcise his firstborn, because he was a stranger in "a foreign land." Through this circumcision, he returned to the covenant of his forefathers.

Therefore, God did not meet Moshe regarding the matter of circumcision in the land of Midyan, but only when he left it – "And it came to pass, on the way in the inn." It was also not in the land of Egypt, where Moshe was supposed to circumcise his son, according to his understanding. Moshe was sent to take the Israelites out of Egypt, and not to reestablish his own identity and their identity as the congregation of the children of Israel, "my brothers that are in Egypt."

(Translated by David Strauss)