

The River and the Redeemer

by Rav Chanoch Waxman

I

Unlike those he would eventually lead out of slavery, Moshe never served an Egyptian taskmaster. He was spared the whip and the backbreaking drudgery. In fact, Moshe belonged, not to the slave class, but to the class of nobles. During his youth in Egypt, rather than spending his days amongst slaves, Moshe moved in the most rarified circles, the court and house of Pharaoh.

How Moshe got there is familiar. Shortly after his birth, his mother realized that she could no longer conceal him. Realizing that he would soon be detected and cast to his death, she fashioned a basket and after placing him in it, set it amidst the reeds by the banks of the Nile (Shemot 2:3). There the daughter of Pharaoh found him and, taking mercy upon him, adopted him as her son (2:6, 10).

While the Torah clearly marks out Moshe's path from child of slaves to child of a princess, it gives us little clue as to the necessity and meaning of Moshe's upbringing as an Egyptian prince. We are left wondering as to the reason for his transformation from slave to royal. What prompted the divine wisdom to arrange for the future redeemer of Israel to be raised in the house of Pharaoh? In other words, how does this very first part of Moshe's biography fit into the larger story of his life and his destiny?

Let us complicate the matter a little bit. Throughout the beginning of Chapter Two, the story of Moshe's birth and move from his birth home to his adoptive home (2:1-10), the Torah sets up a textual interrelationship between Moshe's birth mother and the daughter of Pharaoh. Upon Moshe's birth, Moshe's mother "sees" that he is good (2:2). When she can no longer conceal him, in order to save him, she "takes" the basket (2:3). Shortly afterwards, the text describes the daughter of Pharaoh as also "seeing" and "taking." She "sees" the basket amidst the reeds, and "takes" it to her (2:5). Her "seeing" and "taking" place her in parallel to Moshe's mother and emphasize the nascent fulfillment of Moshe's mother's hopes in seeing and taking. His mother hoped for someone else, better able to protect her child than she, to glance upon her child with the very same love that she bore her child, to see the "goodness" that she saw (2:2). The daughter of Pharaoh is that person.

In fact, her acts of "seeing" and "taking" are followed in the text by a third occurrence of the verb pair. Upon opening the basket, the daughter of Pharaoh "sees" the child and has mercy upon him (2:6). This is followed by her acquiescing to the child's sister's suggestion to hire a Hebrew wet nurse, the hiring of Moshe's mother for the job, and the "taking" of Moshe by his very own mother (2:9). This second vision of the daughter of Pharaoh, her second "seeing," completes the plan of the mother of Moshe and miraculously allows her second act of "taking," the return, if even temporarily, of the child she never dared hope to see again. Once again, the women are linked, parallel mothers engaged in the joint project of saving the child.

The complex parallel and cooperative relationship expressed by the verb pair can be further elucidated through a structural point. Throughout the story, the child moves around. In the first stage he is located with his birth mother, in her basket and under her daughter's watchful eye (2:1-4). At this point, he is found by the daughter of Pharaoh, who takes possession of him (2:5-7). In the third stage of the story, the child once again moves back to the care of his mother (2:8-9) and finally in the fourth stage, back to the care of the daughter of Pharaoh (2:10). This A-B-A-B pattern once again stresses the two-mother parallel argued for above.

In the same vein, we may note that Moshe is referred to by the word "son" (ben) twice, once as the son of his Israelite mother (2:2), and once as the son of the daughter of Pharaoh (2:10). Likewise, we are twice told that he has "grown up" (vayigdal), once upon leaving the care of his birth mother (2:10), and once upon "going out" (2:11), only days before permanently leaving the care of his adoptive mother (2:15). He has been raised twice.

Finally, the name Moshe fits with this theme. The daughter of Pharaoh named the child Moshe, since she had drawn him from the water, "min hamayim meshitihu" (2:10). His name reflects the crucial moment of linkage, the forging of parallel between the two women, the creation of the cooperative endeavor of saving and raising the child.

In sum, in thinking about the mystery of Moshe's youth, we cannot limit ourselves to focusing on his royal upbringing or Egyptian education. Rather we must focus on the role of the daughter of Pharaoh and the cooperative endeavor of saving and raising the child sketched at the beginning of Chapter Two. In other words, what constitutes the significance of the daughter of Pharaoh becoming the second mother of Moshe? What constitutes the inner meaning of Moshe being saved in this way?

II

As briefly noted above, the motif of the "river" comprises an important element in the story of the birth of Moshe and his rescue. This of course is where the action happens. Moshe's mother places him in "the river" (2:3), the daughter of Pharaoh goes down to bathe at "the river" (2:5) and the maidservants of the daughter of Pharaoh are depicted as walking along the banks of "the river" (2:5). Moreover, the naming of Moshe contains an implicit reference to the river. He has been drawn from the water (2:10), i.e. the river where the daughter of Pharaoh bathed.

Taken together with the double usage of the term "son" (2:2, 10), the focus on "the river" forges an interesting connection to the verse immediately preceding the story of Moshe's birth and rescue, the report of Pharaoh's murderous decree. As the culmination of a lengthy process delineated in Chapter One, Pharaoh demands the commission of genocide by the Egyptian people.

And Pharaoh commanded all his people, saying. Every son (ben) that is born you shall cast into the river, and every daughter you shall leave alive. (1:22)

Here too, we have the term "son" and the mention of "the river." In fact, the story of the birth and rescue of Moshe (2:1-10) constitutes the reversal of Pharaoh's decree. Pharaoh had demanded that the "sons" and "the river" be conjoined for the purposes of death. In the story of the birth and rescue of Moshe, Moshe's mother places him in the river on the hope of somehow preserving his life. The child is rescued and raised by the daughter of Pharaoh. In other words, the "son" and "the river" are conjoined for the purposes of life.

The name of Moshe further emphasizes the reversal theme. Pharaoh had commanded the throwing of "the son" into the river. Here, in a clear physical reversal, the son is drawn from the river.

Moreover, Moshe is rescued by the daughter of Pharaoh, the daughter of he who issued the decree. As if to emphasize the undermining of Pharaoh's will and rule, the term "the daughter of Pharaoh" appears numerous times throughout the story (2:5, 7, 8, 9, 10) and constitutes the sole identity of Moshe's adoptive mother. Pharaoh's very own daughter constitutes the instrument of his reversal.

Finally, in nearly the ultimate irony, the child who by virtue of Pharaoh's decree should have been drowned, becomes the adopted son of his daughter, his adopted grandson. The child is raised in his court and house, as a prince of Egypt.

III

This is not the first time Pharaoh's plans have been frustrated. As pointed out previously, Pharaoh's shameless demand for the commission of genocide constitutes the culmination of a lengthy process.

At first, claiming that "the people of the Children of Israel are more numerous and mightier than we" (1:9), Pharaoh instituted forced labor for the Children of Israel. He placed taskmasters over them and had them build cities. While the purpose of the labor seems primarily political and economic, control over the Children of Israel and the enrichment of Egypt, Pharaoh's plan also contains a strategic-ethnic component. It is in order to "afflict them with burdens" (1:11). Slavery in the ancient Near East comprised not just a method for the control of a "numerous and mighty people" but also a way to wear them down, to slowly but surely lead to their physical elimination.

But Pharaoh's first plan failed spectacularly. Immediately after the description of the plan we are told that "the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew" (1:12). Undeterred, Pharaoh moves on to the next stage. Where as before the Children of Israel were only subjected to "taskmasters" (sarei misim), a standard institution of forced labor (see Ramban 1:10), and forced to build cities (1:11), now they are subject to "ruthless enslavement," "embittered lives," "hard labor" and all forms of work, both urban and agricultural (1:13-14).

Apparently, stage two also didn't seem to do the trick. Shortly afterwards, Pharaoh commands the midwives of the Hebrew women, to murder all male children upon their birth (1:15-16). Surely this technique will serve to reduce the number of the Hebrews. But even stage three, the command for hidden genocide proved insufficient. The midwives fear God. They claim that the

Hebrew women give birth before they can arrive and refuse to carry out Pharaoh's order (1:17-19). Once again, despite Pharaoh's most valiant attempts we are told that "the people multiplied and grew very mighty" (1:20). In response, perhaps nearing desperation and having already laid the groundwork, Pharaoh moves to stage four. He shifts from a policy of hidden genocide to a policy of open genocide. He commands that all Egyptian citizens participate in throwing the baby boys into the river.

All of this seems no mere accident. Throughout the escalation and the slow slide into genocide, the text attributes the ever increasing growth of the Hebrews and the frustration of Pharaoh's plans to the hand of God. The midwives refuse to carry out the stage three plan of hidden genocide because they fear God. Likewise, the verse that most clearly emphasizes the repeated failure of Pharaoh's plans also emphasizes the covenantal context of the oppression at the hands of the Egyptians. Shemot 1:12 states that "the more they afflicted (ya'anu) them, the more they multiplied and grew." The term affliction constitutes the key term and concept in the Covenant of the Pieces (15:13). The promise of multiplication of descendants comprises the conceptual partner of the suffering promised in the covenant (Bereishit 15:1-13). Pharaoh's actions are both a result of divine providence and simultaneously countered by divine providence.

This entire theme reaches its crescendo in the story termed "The Birth and Rescue of Moshe" (2:1-10), what may now be thought of as the providential contradiction of the fourth stage of Pharaoh's plan. The Egyptian oppression of the Children of Israel has deteriorated into open and systematic mass murder. But just as God countered and frustrated Pharaoh's previous actions, so too here he undercuts Pharaoh. In a story that foreshadows of the battle between God and Pharaoh implicit in the entire exodus from Egypt story, God reverses Pharaoh and conjoins "the river" and "son" to provide life. This rescued child will be the future redeemer of the Children of Israel, the instrument for bringing the entire edifice of oppression crashing down. Moreover, in almost the ultimate demonstration of the power of providence and the impotence of Pharaoh's rule, Pharaoh's own daughter becomes the mother of the instrument of Egypt's destruction. Pharaoh and his house raise the instrument of their eventual defeat. They rescue and raise the redeemer.

Further Study

1. Reread 1:22. See 7:7 and Rashi's comment to 1:22. What constitutes the motivation of the Rabbinic opinion cited by Rashi (see Sota 12b)? How does this opinion fit with the theme of providence sketched in the shiur above? How does it explain God's limited reaction to the decree?
2. See Ibn Ezra 2:3 (end of comments). He suggests two approaches for resolving the problem discussed in the shiur above. Read 2:11-12, 16-19 and try to distinguish between the distinct approaches. Try to construct a variation on Ibn Ezra's first approach. See 2:19 and 3:8 for help. Can we view 2:1-10 as a formative experience necessary for Moshe's identity and character?
3. Read 3:1-7. Note the frequency of the term for "seeing." Take a look at 2:2, 3, 5-6, 11. What constitutes the link between Moshe's mother, the daughter of Pharaoh, Moshe and God? What does vision signify in Chapters two and three? Are certain characters being defined as like each other or God? In what ways?
4. Reread 1:22-2:1. Given that Miriam and Aharon are older than Moshe, how can Moshe be born "first?" What is the link between the decree and the marriage? See Rashi, Rashbam and Ramban to 2:1 for answers. Rashi and the Rabbinic opinion cited by Ramban are based upon the Talmud Sotah 12b-13a. See the original. Think about the following questions: If one adopts the "proper chronological order approach" without adding the prophecy element, what new light does this shed on 2:1-4? How does this fit with Rashi's comment to 1:15?

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