

## From Egyptian Prince to Israelite Redeemer

By Rav Ezra Bick

It is a commonplace of rabbinic commentary that Bereishit is the story of individuals - the avot - and Shemot is the story of a people. For instance, this is one explanation given for the repetition of the verse "And these are the names of the Israelites who came to Egypt" (Shemot 1,1 and Bereishit 46,8). Our parasha repeats the census in order to introduce "And the Israelites reproduced and swarmed and multiplied and were strengthened greatly, and the land was filled with them" (1,7) - in other words, the individuals became a people.

Obviously, there is one outstanding personality in Sefer Shemot; however, while Bereishit can be fairly characterized as the history of individuals, it would not be correct to say that the central theme of Shemot is the life-story of Moshe. Nonetheless, there can be no question that the individual personality of Moshe is an important focus of the story of the exodus, at least to the extent that it is a crucial link in the development of the people of Israel. I think it would not be an exaggeration of the importance of Moshe to say that he plays a crucial role in the formation of the people, and that the Torah therefore does, at least in the this book of Shemot, tell his personal story and highlights his character traits in order to help us understand how the motley gang of slaves becomes the chosen people. This is most clearly true in the first parasha of the book, which devotes a large section to his personal history before leading up to God's revelation to him at the burning bush. I therefore wish this week to examine the incidents, in this week's parasha, which concentrate on Moshe's personal development, namely the stories found in chapter 2.

There are four linked incidents (not including his birth and short trip down the canal); the Egyptian striking the Hebrew, the two fighting Hebrews, Paro's attempt on Moshe's life, and the rescue of the daughter's of the priest of Midyan. These incidents are recounted in nearly telegraphic brevity, with only about two verses each. Therefore, we will have to read them very closely to pick up the hints and meanings in each. Let us analyze and compare each story.

### A. First Day Out

The first incident is told in two verses, one describing the situation Moshe faced, and one his response.

And it came about in those days, and Moshe grew and went out to his brethren and saw their suffering; and he saw an Egyptian striking a Hebrew of his brethren. (2,11)

The opening of the verse is very puzzling. "In those days" - what days? Surely not the days described in the previous verse: "And the child grew and she brought him to the daughter of Paro and he became her child; and she called his name Moshe, for I drew him from the water" (2,10). This describes

the age when he was weaned, and was big enough to be separated from his nurse-mother. In fact, using a stylistic form, which will be repeated several times in this parasha, the Torah distinguishes between Moshe's age in these two verses by using the SAME phrase twice. Twice, in two consecutive verses, the Torah states that "Moshe grew." In juxtaposition, it is clear that the verb must mean different things, or else it would not have been repeated. In the language of the midrash which Rashi quotes, "the first (growing) is size, and the second is position, as Paro appointed him over his house." This interpretation grants different meanings to the two instances of the verb "grew" (gadal). The Ramban comments simply, "He grew and became a man, for in the previous instance it says the 'child grew' until he no longer needed to be weaned... and afterwards he grew and became a man of intelligence." The MEANING of the verb is the same, but it refers to two different and distinct stages, one in infancy and one much later. As we shall see, this parasha is characterized by double-verb instances, of which this is the first. But since it is clear that Moshe has grown a great deal in the second verse, compared to the first, this makes the phrase "in those days" difficult to understand.

Let us continue reading the verse. What is the most striking word in the verse? Twice the Torah refers to the Jews as "his brethren." Moshe goes out "to his brethren," and he sees an Egyptian striking a Hebrew "of his brethren." It is clear that the Torah is telling us what lies behind Moshe's actions - not curiosity, not only a protest against injustice, not merely a desire to help the persecuted and the weak, but a deep identification with his brethren, with his brothers. In other words, Moshe, in this story, is not being held up as a paradigm of justice, but as a champion of his own people. This is made clear by the second instance of the double-but-different verb case. Moshe "SEES their suffering" and he "SEES an Egyptian striking a Hebrew." Rashi, on the first "seeing," comments: "He prepared his eyes and heart to feel sorry for them." Why does Rashi make this comment? The two instances of "seeing" do not have the same meaning. The second means to see in the normal sense. The first however does not refer to mere perception, recording objective facts. This is clear by the grammatical form of the Hebrew - "Vayar BE-sivlotam." The suffering is not the direct object of his seeing (vayar ET sivlotam). He "saw" INTO their suffering. Rashi explains that "lirot bi" means to understand, to delve into, including identification, to open not only one's eyes but one's heart as well, as opposed to "lirot et" which is mere sense-perception.

This takes place because Moshe is not facing slaves, or foreigners, but, from the onset, "his brethren." Even before he saw them, he had gone out "to his brethren." He is searching for his brothers, and therefore he "commiserates with their suffering" upon seeing it. Therefore, when he sees, in the normal sense, an Egyptian (not a brother) striking a Hebrew "OF HIS BRETHREN," he reacts not by writing a letter to the editor of the Nile Times, but by striking the Egyptian dead. Moshe is not a judge or superior, but one with the suffering slave. He is a protagonist in this conflict, not a referee.

This explains the opening of the verse. We have learnt that Moshe is being brought up in Paro's house as a SON of Paro's daughter. In that house, the Egyptians are his brethren. And then, IN THOSE DAYS; i.e., from within that social framework, Moshe WENT OUT to his real brethren, to those in whom he discovered his brotherhood and identity. The Torah is emphasizing in the words "in those days" that Moshe's heart beats with Jewish identity not as a natural result of his good Jewish upbringing but because he has chosen to identify that way despite his upbringing, because, in Rashi's words, "he has prepared his eyes and his heart."

The protagonists in this story have no names - there is "the Egyptian" and there is "the Hebrew." Moshe, in the next verse (12) strikes "the Egyptian" and buries him in the sand. Even Moshe has "lost" his name after the initial "going out." He has simply joined his brethren and become one of them. While undoubtedly just, the stirring in Moshe's soul is national identification, not ethics and justice.

## B. Second Day

He went out on the second day, and behold, two Hebrew persons fighting; and he said to the evil one, 'why do you strike your fellow?' (13)

We already know what "to GO OUT" means for Moshe "in those days." The Torah does not have to repeat for us that going OUT means leaving the Egyptian household where he still lives in order to join his brethren. Imagine then the chagrin and disappointment the idealistic Moshe, just beginning to be swept up in his new-found identification with his suffering brothers, so soon after he put his life on the line for the national ideal, must feel when the sight that meets his eyes on the second day is two Hebrews fighting between themselves. Notice that here the Torah does not say "and he SAW two Hebrew persons." This verb has been set aside for the eyes of Moshe that have been "prepared to feel sorry for them." The sight of the second day cannot be grasped by the eyes and heart of Moshe who is "going out" to his brethren. How does Moshe, the Jewish patriot, react?

Moshe remonstrates, "why do you strike your fellow (re'acha)?" He does not call one the "brother" of the other, and the Torah does not remind us here that they are his brothers. Moshe does not see them as brothers of his now, and surely not brothers of each other. The word "echav," brethren, in the previous story, does not designate a familial relationship, nor an ethical one (as in "all men are brothers"), but a heartfelt bond of identification and shared destiny that Moshe has discovered the previous day. On this, the second day, it is not present between them, and Moshe does not react on the basis of his feelings from yesterday. Rather, here is Moshe is the ethical personality. Perhaps, deep down, Moshe's willingness to assume the role of the ethical teacher derives from his feelings of responsibility as a "brother," but the reaction itself is very different than the leap of commitment from the day before. Moshe's rebuke assumes a measure of objectivity, of distancing, which is quite the opposite of the spontaneous identification of yesterday.

The "evil" one immediately senses this.

And he said: Who has made you a ruler and judge over us; are you planning to kill me, as you killed the Egyptian? (14)

He accuses Moshe of not being his brother, but a judge. All of a sudden, the brother from yesterday is concerned about justice, searching who is responsible rather than automatically taking the side of his brother. Moshe has, in a manner not explicated in the text, identified the guilty party (two Hebrews are fighting, but Moshe speaks to "the evil one"). He is discriminating (in the sense of distinguishing), rather than embracing any Jew simply because he is a Jew. That is exactly what the "evil" one, this early Jewish patriot, is angry about. Are you going to treat me, your brother, as you treated the Egyptian, a stranger to you?

This, I think, is what Moshe fears. "And Moshe feared and said: Indeed, the matter is known." The enigmatic phrase, "the matter (ha-davar) is known," elicits many midrashic interpretations. I would suggest that it includes not merely the fact of the killing of the Egyptian, but the attitude that lay behind it - that Moshe no longer identified as an Egyptian himself but had joined, in heart and soul, the Jews. This made him a rebel, and not merely a royal delinquent, which presumably would not have been punished too severely by his foster-grandfather in despotic Egypt.

We have seen two sides of Moshe, Moshe the Jewish patriot, and Moshe the ethical judge. In both cases, Moshe had to "go out," that is, leave his Egyptian background, in order to come to grips with these two new and dialectical sides of his personality. This going out, transcending of one's childhood training and natural personality, now becomes even more extreme, as Moshe has to flee Egypt.

## C. Exodus

The third incident is the most concise of all, completely described in one packed verse.

Paro heard about this matter, and sought to kill Moshe, and Moshe fled from Paro; and he "sat" in the land of Midyan, and he sat by the well. (15)

I am sure that those of you who bother to read the English translation are already correcting me. Moshe did not SIT in the land of Midyan, he SETTLED there. That is quite correct. I merely wished to highlight the third example of our double-but different verbs, since in both cases, and in very close proximity, the Torah uses the verb "yashav." But of course "yashav" in a country means to dwell or to settle, whereas when Moshe came to the well, he sat down by its side. But this merely highlights the real question I wished to ask. The order of the verse is clearly backwards! Moshe is fleeing Paro, arrives in Midyan, and comes to the well. First he sits down, and only later could he be said to settle. In fact, any mention of settling should be postponed until after the story of Re'uel's daughters, since Moshe presumably has no home at all in Midyan until he is brought to their house. Why does the Torah say immediately after "Moshe fled" that he settled in Midyan, and only afterwards begin the story of the well and the seven daughters?

This story, as opposed to the first two (and the fourth), does not describe an act of might or bravery of Moshe. Moshe flees from the danger into which he has been placed. I would

suggest, though, that this is not merely a bridge to the next, important, story of Moshe's confrontation with the shepherds of Midyan. The verse, though terse, is so detailed, that it seems impossible to view it only as an explanation how Moshe happened to be in Midyan. The Netziv points out that the expression "from Paro" ("Moshe fled from Paro") is unnecessary and the verse would have read just as well - perhaps even better, had it said, "Paro sought to kill Moshe and Moshe fled to Midyan." I think the answer is that the Torah wishes to stress not just the geographical movement, but the completion of the cultural break. Moshe is fleeing FROM PARO, is completely breaking his connection to the Egyptian royal house. We can imagine that even though Moshe identifies with his brethren and feels their suffering, he might still seek to help them from a position of power within the Egyptian system. Being a minister in the Egyptian government, even while in inner opposition and alienation, he would argue that he could do more by remaining a member in good standing of the Egyptian power structure. Paro forces him to flee for his life, and it is not important only that Moshe flee to Midyan, but even more that he is fleeing FROM Paro.

It is possible however, that Moshe is in a difficult and strange position now. Cut off from his Egyptian roots, he has not found himself welcomed by the Jews either. His one encounter has in fact led to his banishment. Moshe, forced to flee from Paro, is (perhaps subconsciously) heading to SETTLE in Midyan. This is the meaning of the juxtaposition of "Moshe fled from Paro" and "he settled in the land of Midyan." He has not actually done any action that could be construed as settling - on the contrary, he has no place of his own and therefore sits, a homeless stranger, by the well, outside the city, but the movement from Egypt to Midyan is equally described as "fleeing from Paro" and as "settling in Midyan." This part of the verse does not describe what happens AFTER he travels - that is the content of "he sat by the well" - but is an alternative description of the movement itself.

We now understand the importance of this verse and the incident it tells. Moshe is overcoming his natural cultural identity. He is leaving Egypt and searching for his brethren. But Divine providence decrees that he can only come home to the Jewish people by first being completely divorced from the hope of any natural belonging. Moshe will not join the Jews because he has discovered that he is more comfortable with their cultural ways. The path from Egyptian to Hebrew is not a simple one. First he will find himself with no home at all, a stranger settling in a strange land to which he has no connection at all, as he expresses it in naming his first son - "I am a stranger in a strange land" (22). Only afterwards, after hearing the voice of God who sends him back, will he make the voyage to join the Jews.

#### **D. Rescuing the Maidens**

This brings us to the last incident of Moshe's pre-prophetic life. The part that concerns us, that which deals with Moshe's character and its development (rather than with his marriage), is, like the previous three incidents, told in a terse and concise manner. One verse describes the characters (16), and one verse describes the situation before Moshe and his reaction.

The shepherds came and chased them away, and Moshe rose and saved them, and watered their sheep. (17)

Moshe's reaction here is fundamentally different than in the first two cases. In the first, Moshe acted patriotically out of identification with "his brethren." The root of his action was group identity. In the second he acted ethically as a judge, in rebuking the evil perpetrator of an evil act. The root of his action was justice. In this case, Moshe has no identification with the daughters of the priest of Midyan, and he is not interested in justice. The verb the Torah uses is "vayoshiyan" - he saved them. Moshe is acting heroically, and the root of his action is nobility and bravery. He sees the strong oppressing the weak, and "rises up" to rescue the weak. The Torah stresses that he subsequently waters the sheep for them, an action not necessary from the perspective of the conflict which precede it. Moshe is helping those who need help, rather than helping his brethren or admonishing the wicked. He neither punishes the shepherds nor admonishes them - he simply rescues the girls.

This personality trait, while admirable, seems very distant from what we expect as necessary from the future deliverer of Israel. Obviously, to be the leader of the Jews, Moshe needs to be their champion and feel their sorrow and oppression. He needs to have a fine sense of justice and ethics, for the leadership of Israel in exodus is also the one who will bring down the Torah and teach them the ways of God. But why is a necessary condition of Moshe's education that he be a wandering hero, a sort of Hercules who without any personal interest rises up to help the helpless? The answer, of course, is that Moshe's leadership of Israel, if based on his love of his brethren, also requires an innate sense of help for anyone who needs assistance, without the element of patriotic identification. For this to come out, Moshe, unlike any other Jew of his time, had to be divorced from the Jews totally, to be a stranger in a strange land, in order to face seven strange maidens struggling with the local bullies and to instinctively rise and rescue them. With that personality, he will be sent back to rejoin the people he never knew and be both one of them and their leader.

#### **E. Epilogue - Marriage**

Moshe marries Tzipora, one of the seven daughters he has rescued. It surely is ironic, in light of how I interpreted the meaning of Moshe's fleeing Egypt, that the daughters describe him as "A man of Egypt." The Torah says, "Moshe agreed to live (lashevet) with the man, and he gave his daughter Tzipora to Moshe." There is an air of passivity in this statement. Moshe did not settle down in Midyan after all; he AGREED to live with the man. We have the impression of his being persuaded and agreeing with no great enthusiasm. (This is the third "lashevet" in this section, and the meaning is neither to settle, as in "vayeishev be-eretz Midyan," nor to sit, as in "vayeishev al ha-be'er," but means to join a family - "lashevet ET ha-ish," to move in). If we did not know better, we might think that the Moshe saga is over, the promise of his great deeds of youth buried in domesticity and shepherding, a stranger, dependant on a local prince. Moshe, who went out to "see" his people's suffering, and saw an Egyptian striking a Hebrew of his brethren - what does he see now? The next "seeing" will be God's: "And God SAW the Israelites, and God knew" (25). Soon afterwards, Moshe will "see and behold the bush is burning in fire and the

bush is not consumed" (3,2). But that is already a different chapter.

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