YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

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**PARASHAT SHEMOT**

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Sponsored by Aaron and Tzipora Ross and family in memory of our grandparents Shmuel Nachamu ben Shlomo Moshe HaKohen, Chaya bat Yitzchak Dovid, Shimon ben Moshe, and Rivka bat Aharon, whose Yahrzeits fall out this month.

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Dedicated in memory of my grandmother, Szore bat Simen Leib (Weinberger), whose *yahrzeit* is on the 18th of Tevet. May her soul be among the Righteous in Gan Eden. From those who remember her.

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In memory of Norma Blander z"l, by Freda Rosenfeld and Hillel Wallick

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Birth of a Leader

By Rav Shimon Klein

Introduction

The Torah includes two stories that describe the early part of Moshe's life. The first (*Shemot* 2:1-10) documents his birth and the circumstances through which he comes to Pharaoh's house; the second (ibid. 10-22) describes him going out to his brethren, the move to Yitro's home, his marriage to Tzippora, and his stay in Midian until the birth of his son.

The fact that the Torah provides a record of Moshe's birth and the details of his early childhood should not to be taken for granted. After all, the *Tanakh* offers us no details about the birth of Avraham, nor about the childhood of such leaders as Shaul, David, or Eliyahu. A birth story touches on the very essence of a person; it reveals the context in which he came into the world and the experiences that made an impression on his psyche. The two stories that the Torah chooses to tell about Moshe's early life point, as it were, to the foundations of his life.

Childhood Story – Literary Structuring

Before we examine the stories themselves, attention should be paid to their chiastic structure. In this model, the exposition and conclusion match each other in terms of content and style; likewise the second and the next-to-last units; and so on. At the center of the chiastic structure there is a single sentence that stands alone, and this serves as the turning point in between the two sections.

Let us now look at the story of Moshe's birth and examine its chiastic structure:

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| (1) And there went a man from the house of Levi, and he took a daughter of Levi. (2) And the woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw him, that he was good, she hid him for three months. | | | | |
|  | (3) And when she could no longer hide him, she took for him a papyrus box, and coated it with slime and with pitch, and placed the child in it, and placed it in the reeds by the bank of the Nile. | | | |
|  | | (4) And his sister stood at a distance, to know what would be done to him. | | |
|  | | | (5) And Pharaoh's daughter went down to wash herself at the Nile, and her maidens walked alongside the Nile, and she saw the box among the reeds and sent her maidservant to fetch it. | |
|  | | | | (6) And she opened it and she saw the child, and behold, a weeping boy. |
|  | | | And she had compassion on him and said, “He is one of the Hebrew children.” | |
|  | | (7) And his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, “Shall I go and call a wet-nurse for you from the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for you?” (8) And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, “Go.” And the girl went and called the child's mother. | | |
|  | (9) And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, “Take this child away, and nurse him for me, and I will give your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed him. | | | |
| (10) And the child grew, and she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son, and she called his name Moshe, and she said, “Because I drew him (*meshitihu*) from the water.” | | | | |

We might summarize the structure as follows:

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| The family circle – A man takes a wife, a son is born to them, and he is in his parents' home. | | | | |
|  | The mother parts from him, placing the child at the bank of the Nile. | | | |
|  | | His sister parts from him, standing at a distance to see what will become of him. | | |
|  | | | Pharaoh's daughter comes to the Nile together with her handmaidens. | |
|  | | | | The encounter – "And behold, a weeping boy." |
|  | | | Pharaoh's daughter has compassion on the child. | |
|  | | His sister proposes a wet-nurse for the child. | | |
|  | The mother re-enters the picture as the child's wet-nurse, until he is weaned. | | | |
| The family circle – Moshe grows up among his family and is brought afterwards to Pharaoh's daughter. | | | | |

Process of Severance

It is no coincidence that the story is built in chiastic form. This structure leads us to translate the story into a panoramic picture made up of landmarks in Moshe's life. There is also a climax, following which he moves backwards, as it were, to the starting point. In essence, the moment of climax makes an impact on him, and he will no longer be the same as he was before.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Let us explain this idea more fully. The verse preceding this narrative documents Pharaoh's decree:

And Pharaoh commanded all of his people, saying: “Every boy that is born shall you cast into the Nile, and every daughter shall you leave alive." (*Shemot* 1:22)

In light of this background, the fact that the man in question takes a wife is not a simple matter. This woman then bears a son, and despite the decree that all boys must be cast into the Nile, she hides him for three months. At this stage, the child is surrounded by his natural environment – the home and family.

"And when she could no longer hide him…" – This happy period comes to an end, and there now looms a process of separation and severance, which comprises a number of steps. First, the mother takes a papyrus box, places the child in it, and leaves it on the bank of the Nile. The next stage happens after she departs: his sister observes from afar "to know what would be done to him." Pharaoh's daughter approaches the Nile accompanied by her maidservants; she notices the box and dispatches one of the maids to collect it.

Since we read this story with knowledge of its ending, this scene strikes us as a positive development heralding good news. However, an innocent, initial reading arouses some difficult emotions. "Pharaoh's daughter" is the daughter of the enemy, the daughter of the king who has decreed death for all Jewish boys, and her handmaidens are women of the court. This encounter is dangerous, even potentially catastrophic. But suddenly, at the moment of suspenseful climax, there is a surprise. Pharaoh's daughter opens the box, sees what is inside – "Behold, a weeping boy" – and she feels compassion. A moment of compassion changes the course of this child's life.

In the wake of this show of humanity, the infant's sister reappears on the scene, seeking to restore him to his family. Her initiative is crowned with success, and Moshe makes his way back via his sister to his mother and eventually to his family. This return to the bosom of his family affords him a few more quality years with his parents so that he can develop healthy roots and foundations for his future life. At the same time, there has also been a turning point that has introduced a new affiliation and attachment into his life – to Pharaoh's daughter, to whom he will return, with time, to be her son.

Closer inspection of this climactic turning point shows that even the compassion shown by Pharaoh's daughter fails to dissipate the dark fears regarding the possible results of this encounter. Moshe's future as a boy growing up in Pharaoh's palace is murky. What sort of education will he receive? Which values will he learn to cherish? How will he treat his fellow Israelites?

But behold – a world far removed from him extends a merciful hand. His precarious, dangerous situation among the reeds on the bank of the Nile is replaced by a reality in which he is given life, and thus in a sense, Pharaoh's house becomes his habitat. In contrast to the fate of his people, Moshe is looked upon favorably by Pharaoh, Egypt, and the broader culture of the world; he is shown compassion and given life. What are the possible ramifications of this turn of events on his view of reality and on his spiritual boundaries? The next chapter presents the landmarks that comprise and mold his identity.

Identity and Belonging

Moshe is the son of a man of the house of Levi who takes as his wife a daughter of Levi. When he is three months old, his mother places him on the bank on the Nile – "And she took for him a papyrus box… and placed the child in it." The Torah uses the world "child" (*yeled*), not "son" (*ben*), reflecting the emotional severance that accompanies the physical separation; this is reconcilement with the decree. Moshe's mother parts from him, and into the vacuum there enters Pharaoh's daughter – "and she had compassion on him." Initially, she deposits the child with his mother, who maintains her position and treats him as a "child," rather than a "son": "And the woman took the child and nursed him. And when the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter" (9-10). His mother does not develop his dependence on her, and thus she liberates him, preparing him for the new reality that he will face when he is taken to Pharaoh's daughter. In fact, Moshe will resume his identity as a "son" only when he takes up his association with Pharaoh's daughter – "And he became her son." By bestowing his name, Moshe – "and she said, ‘For I drew him out of the water’" – she imprints the story of his identity as a Hebrew child who was drawn out of the Nile.

Why is his name "*Moshe*" rather than "*Mashui*," which would reflect more accurately the story of his being drawn out of the water? This change would seem to have great significance. "*Mashui*," a passive form, reflects the position of one who is saved, as opposed to "*Moshe*," which reflects the position of a savior. Pharoah's daughter molds Moshe with the same psychological position that she herself was in at that moment of compassion, eternalizing her noble act in taking responsibility for his life.

To sum up so far, we might set forth as follows the different layers of identity that are part of Moshe's personality:

At the deepest point of his being, Moshe is the son of his mother; she represents his natural roots and the foundations of his life. Around that core, his mother treats him as a "child," letting go and allowing Pharoah's daughter and Egyptian culture to fill the void. In this sense, Moshe is brought up on Egyptian culture; he receives an Egyptian education and eats "royal food". Especially noteworthy is the fact that Pharaoh's daughter makes no attempt to hide his true identity. She gives him a name that tells the story of his childhood and, even more importantly, bestows on him the qualities of a "*moshe*" – a savior. Seemingly, without this aspect of his name, his affiliation with his own people would remain abstract, distant, and unrealized. Its presence serves to activate and motivate Moshe in the direction of his destined path. An early manifestation of this is evident in the next story.

Story of Adulthood

Moshe grows up, and in the next unit of verses, the Torah recounts what happens to him during the next period of his life. It begins with his maturation, as the son of Pharaoh's daughter, and it concludes with Moshe settling in Midian, where he establishes a family and produces progeny. The skeleton of this story is remarkably similar to the first one. Moshe now deserts his (Egyptian) home and identity. After three stages, he reaches a place of water, and this time it is a well that serves as the climax of the story. In the wake of what happens there, he finds a refuge – this time in Midian. At first, he is invited by the father of the women whom he helped. Afterwards, he marries one of them, and finally, he builds his family and his life in Midian:[[2]](#footnote-2)

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| (11) And it came to pass in those days, when Moshe grew up | | | | | |
|  | That he went out to his brothers, and saw their burdens, and he saw an Egyptian striking a Hebrew man of his brothers. (12) And he turned this way and that, and when he saw that there was no man, he struck the Egyptian, and hid him in the sand. | | | | |
|  | | (13) And he went out on the second day, and behold – two Hebrew men strove together, and he said to the offender, “Why do you strike your neighbor?” (14) And he said, “Who made you a prince and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me, as you killed the Egyptian?” And Moshe feared, and said, “Surely the matter is known.” | | | |
|  | | | (15) And Pharaoh heard this matter, and he sought to kill Moshe, so Moshe fled from before Pharaoh and dwelled in the land of Midian, and he sat down by a well. | | |
|  | | | | (16) And the priest of Midian had seven daughters, and they came and drew water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. (17) And the shepherds came and drove them away, | |
|  | | | | | but Moshe arose  and helped them with their flock. |
|  | | | | (18) And they came to Re'uel, their father, and he said, “How is it that you have come so soon today?” (19) And they said, “An Egyptian man delivered us from the hand of the shepherds, and also drew much water for us, and watered the flock.” | |
|  | | | (20) And he said to his daughters, “And where is he? Why have you then left the man? Call him, that he may eat bread.” | | |
|  |  | (21) And Moshe agreed to dwell with the man, and he gave Tzippora, his daughter, to Moshe. | | | |
|  | (22) And she bore a son, and he called his name Gershom, for he said, “I have been a stranger (*ger hayiti*) in a foreign land.” | | | | |

Moshe is Cast out of the Camp

Let us examine what has happened here. As a first stage, "He went out to his brothers and he saw their burdens." Moshe is like a son to Pharaoh's daughter, and now he sets aside this affiliation in order to go and observe the affliction of his brethren. On the way, he sees an Egyptian striking a Hebrew man "of his brothers." This two-fold affiliation to his brothers indicates his intention of returning to his original identification group, his people.

At the second stage, Moshe "went out on the second day," too. In contrast to his earlier depiction as a defender of his brethren against the Egyptians, he is now acting within the Israelite camp: "And behold, two Hebrew men were striving together." He sees what is going on, and from a position as referee, he tells the offending party, "Why do you strike your neighbor?" The response that he receives is puzzling: "Who made you a prince and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me, as you killed the Egyptian?" This response comprises two parts. First, "Who gave you the authority to be a prince and judge over us?," and second, "You killed an Egyptian; do you mean to kill me, too?" It would seem that these two parts actually tell the same story: "We did not appoint you as a prince or judge over us, and in fact you are not one of ours, for just as you killed an Egyptian – you could kill a Hebrew." These two claims are a slap in the face to the "Prince of Egypt" who seeks to make his way back into the midst of his own people.[[3]](#footnote-3)

“And Moshe feared, and said, ‘Surely the matter is known.’” The act of killing the Egyptian represents a betrayal of the Egyptian people. And once the matter becomes known, Moshe has no ground to stand on; he has lost his home, and he is forced to flee for his life.

The third stage of Moshe's separation from Egypt comes when Pharaoh hears of his betrayal and wants to kill him. Moshe flees; he leaves Egypt and arrives in Midian, sitting down beside a well.

Now we reach the climax or turning point of the story. Moshe finds himself face to face with a situation that needs addressing. The priest of Midian has seven daughters, who come to water their father's flocks. Some shepherds arrive and chase the women away – all in Moshe's presence. What is he now to do? Simple logic would dictate that he refrain from becoming involved. After all, Moshe had intervened when he saw an Egyptian striking one of his Israelite brethren, and he had also intervened when he saw two Israelites striving together. As a result of his actions on these two occasions, he is now a fugitive. In contrast to the previous occasions, where his intervention was on behalf of fellow Israelites, here he has no connection to the event or the people involved and has no idea what the results of his intervention might be. Nevertheless, "Moshe arose and helped them with their flock." One cannot but recall Pharaoh's daughter, who had previously shown a noble humanity and compassion, thereby saving Moshe. Now Moshe encounters a similar situation, and he “*moshe*” – he arises and helps.

This event, serving as a sort of climax of the story, has implications for the series of events that follow. The protagonists are Yitro and his daughters, and what happens is the direct result of the position of savior that Moshe assumes for himself.

As a first stage, Yitro asks about his daughters' early return home (an indication of regular harassment by the shepherds and the inability to overcome it to date). They tell him that "An Egyptian man delivered us from the hand of the shepherds." They regard Moshe as an Egyptian and describe at some length his favor to them: "[He] delivered us from the hand of the shepherds, and also drew much water for us, and watered the flock." At the next stage, the father asks, "And where is he? Why have you then left the man?" It is only decent that the man be repaid. "Call him, that he may eat bread," he announces, seeking to invite the Egyptian man who has helped his daughters.

At the third stage, Moshe agrees to dwell with Yitro, and the latter gives him his daughter, Tzippora, as a wife. The next stage is that Tzippora gives birth to a son, and Moshe calls him Gershom, "For he said, I was a stranger in a foreign land." Midian, like Egypt, is a foreign place that is not really his own. Midian, like Egypt, may nevertheless provide place for Moshe to grow and develop for a few years. Nevertheless, Midian has a certain advantage, insofar as it offers the proximity of a man of the spirit – Yitro – and a freeing of his ties to Egypt, such that he will be able to return later as a free man to take on the challenge that awaits him in confronting Pharaoh as well as his own people.

The Contents of Moshe's World

The two stories dealing with Moshe's identity are closely bound up with one another. In the first story, events are driven by the choices made by the people around him (his father, mother, and sister, and Pharaoh's daughter). In the second, Moshe is an adult and makes his own choices. These, like the choices previously made for him, play a significant role in molding the course of his life.

Both stories involve Moshe in a process of severing himself from an existing identity. In both instances the severance leads him far away, to an encounter with a world that is foreign to him. The results of both encounters are surprising: in the first encounter, the daughter of the great enemy, Pharaoh, extends a helping hand to him, saving him and helping to mold his life. In the second encounter, it is Moshe himself who extends the helping hand, delivering the shepherdesses. This intervention is a gateway that paves the path to a new life for him in Midian.

What is imbedded in Moshe's complex identity? What are the ramifications of having spheres that are generally perceived as being "beyond the boundaries" becoming the foundations of one's life? The answer seems to be related to the role that this man is destined to play. Moshe will be asked to bring a nation out of Egypt; he will be required to present himself before kings and nations. And he is also destined to bring his people the Torah, which contains the keys to the redemption of all of humanity. Moshe will be called to ascend Mount Sinai and to meet with God, who speaks to him "face to face, as a man speaks to his fellow" (*Shemot* 33:11). What sort of environment is needed to produce such a person? What are the elements of the world of someone whom God chooses as the most suitable candidate to bring Torah to Israel and to convey the message of wisdom and of redemption to all the worlds?

These are some of the questions that the unique story of Moshe's life comes to answer. Moshe does not grow up among "the community," with spiritual boundaries defining his world. He does not think in terms of a single conceptual system that has no room for other, distant, complex worlds. Moshe has his healthy foundations laid down in early childhood, following which he is immediately exposed to the wider world and a broader culture. The world that he inhabits is the broadest and deepest that exists at the time. He grows up in Pharaoh's house, eats royal food, is exposed to principles of leadership, and spends time at the nerve center of the superpower of his era.[[4]](#footnote-4) In Midian, he arrives at a well and comes face to face with a scene that puts him to the test. Will he be committed to justice, truth and freedom – even in a foreign country, far from his people, with his own path cloudy and obscure? His decision, like that of Pharaoh's daughter, brings him to the encounter with the man of the spirit – Yitro, priest of Midian, a man whose wisdom and insights will ultimately enjoy a place of honor in the Torah.[[5]](#footnote-5) He dwells with him for a long time, and eventually, at the age of eighty, he is called upon by God.

The two narratives describe the beginnings of Moshe's life, introducing us to the different layers of his identity, while simultaneously displaying the special way in which they are integrated. Further in-depth study of these elements may shed new light on Moshe's personality and on the path of this unique man of God.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. This transformation of a chiastic structure into a movement in space has the power to imbue many instances of this structure in *Tanakh* with meaning and significance. The common pattern looks something like this: A person undergoes some sort of process, its composite elements being milestones, stage by stage. At the moment of climax, there is an encounter that sears his heart with a new spiritual position. From there, he returns to the previous stages, but these will now be imbued with a new and different meaning. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The structure of this story is not chiastic in the full sense of the word, because Moshe does not end up returning to his Egyptian identity. On the other hand, neither Egypt nor Midian is regarded by Moshe as his real place, and in this sense there is a correlation in the structure: Moshe leaves a foreign country in three stages, experiences an encounter at the climax of the story, and then returns, correspondingly, to a (different) foreign country. The climax in this case brings about a move from the one foreign country (Egypt) to the other (Midian). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Moshe’s brethren actually reject him. It later turns out that it is his abandonment of his Egyptian identity that leads him to a new cultural and spiritual encounter – with Yitro, priest of Midian. But this leaves us with the interesting question of the option that was not realized: had Moshe emerged from his Egyptian affiliation and been accepted by his brethren, what would have happened? It would seem that the structure of this narrative maintains a dialogue with this possibility. There is a stage-by-stage withdrawal from Egypt, and instead of the climax at the well in Midian, we imagine a different climax, within the Israelite camp, following which Moshe would return to his temporary home in Egypt (Pharaoh's palace), but with a profound awareness of his old-new attachment to *Bnei Yisrael*. This scenario does not take place. Two possible reasons for this are: a. the hostile attitude of the Hebrew man towards Moshe is a sort of testimony that *Bnei Yisrael* are not ready to accept him; and b. perhaps Moshe, with his judgmental position vis-à-vis the Israelites, is not yet ready for a position of responsibility and leadership among them. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibn Ezra (2:3): "And God's thoughts are deep; who can stand in His council, and by Him alone are actions weighed. Perhaps God brought it about that Moshe would grow up in a royal palace so that his soul would be primed through study and practice to be on the highest level, rather than being lowly and accustomed to slavery… And another point: had he grown up among his brethren, and known them since his youth, they would have no awe for him [later on], but would consider him as one of them."

   Ibn Ezra illuminates two different aspects of Moshe growing up in Pharaoh's palace: a. The savior of Israel cannot be someone who has grown up as a slave. His soul needs to be "on the highest level": he must grow up amongst royalty and be educated in the concepts of freedom and greatness. b. There is also an advantage to this arrangement for the benefit of *Am Yisrael*: "No-one is a prophet in his own city." Moshe comes to Bnei Yisrael "from the outside," as it were – from another world. As such he is able to implement significant processes amongst the nation. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. On the eve of the giving of the Torah, Moshe meets with Yitro and the latter conveys much advice to him. Moshe's response is, "Moshe obeyed his father-in-law and did all that he had said" (*Shemot* 18:24). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)