**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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**From Slavery to Redemption**

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**Shiur 09: Moses the Adult (1):**

**In Search of Justice**

This *shiur* and the next will examine the three initial episodes of Moses’ life after he emerges from the palace:

1. Moses saves a Hebrew from an Egyptian oppressor (*Shemot* 2:11-12).
2. Moses intervenes to save a Hebrew from a Hebrew oppressor (2:13-14).
3. Moses saves Midianite girls from Midianite shepherds (2:16-17).

Taken together, these initial acts sketch a portrait of an inveterate warrior for justice and decency. Moses unhesitatingly intercedes to save the oppressed from the oppressor, though he is not a party to the conflict. He is not motivated by ethnic considerations, either – the ethnic identities of the oppressed and oppressors shift from one conflict to the next. Moses’ quest for justice seems instinctive and pure, transcending narrow personal interests.

**Episode #1: Moses and the Egyptian Oppressor**

And he turned this way and the other and saw that there was no man. And he struck the Egyptian, and he buried him in the sand. (*Shemot* 2:12)

After witnessing an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, Moses turns in one direction and then the other. It is only when he sees “that there is no man” that he summarily strikes the Egyptian with a fatal blow, then buries him in the sand. Moses’ survey of the surroundings seems, at first glance, furtive; he takes stock of the area to verify that no one is present to witness his vigilante act. Possibly, however, Moses swivels around in a desperate quest for help. If this is his intent, Moses must contend with profound disappointment; neither Egyptian nor Israelite is available to assist him.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Moses’ fiery and impulsive response in defense of his abused brother recalls the behavior of his ancestor Levi, who – along with his brother Shimon – was incensed by Shekhem’s abuse of their sister Dina, killed all the males of the city, and released Dina (*Bereishit* 34:25-26). It seems that such passionate personality traits are typical of the Levite tribe, who will often exhibit idealistic zealotry in defense of God’s honor.[[2]](#footnote-2) Consider the fiery conduct of Pinchas (who impulsively strikes dead the prince of the tribe of Shimon and the Midianite woman with whom he sins – *Bamidbar* 25), or the Levites who answer Moses’ call to arms following the worship of the Golden Calf, summarily executing those involved in the idolatrous revelry (*Shemot* 32:26-28).[[3]](#footnote-3) Levites are known for their loyalty and passion for both God and humans, which can manifest as vigilante acts designed to obtain justice.

A *midrash* regards Moses’ rash conduct toward the oppressive Egyptian as an indication of Moses’ devotion to his people, his willingness to risk his life for Israel:

Moses devoted his life to Israel, and therefore they were attributed as his, as it says, “Go down, for *your* nation has acted basely” [*Shemot* 32:7]… Where do we find that Moses devoted his life to them? As it says, “And it was in those days, and Moses grew up and went out to his brethren and he saw their sufferings” (*Shemot* 2:11), and then it says, “And he turned this way and the other [and saw that there was no man. And he struck the Egyptian].” (*Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael Beshalach*, *Masekhta De-Shira* 1)

Moses’ actions certainly indicate deep compassion for his brethren.[[4]](#footnote-4) But they are also illicit and perhaps even excessive. Why is the story of the great lawgiver of Israel launched with him taking the law into his own hands?[[5]](#footnote-5) In support of Moses’ behavior, one notes that Egypt is likely a society without recourse to lawful procedures, especially for the enslaved.[[6]](#footnote-6) Moses may not have a choice but to resort to spontaneous acts. Does God endorse Moses’ act of striking (*va-yakh*) the tyrannical Egyptian? The text is silent on this matter, withholding criticism or praise in the moment. However, we later see God Himself “strike Egypt” (*va-yakh* – see, e.g., 3:20, 7:17, and 12:12) with ten plagues, the similar wording perhaps a subtle indication of divine approval for Moses’ actions.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Episode #2: Moses and the Fighting Hebrews**

And [Moses] went out on the second day and behold, two Hebrew men were fighting. And [Moses] said to the wicked one, “Why do you strike your friend?” And he said, “Who appointed you the man to be officer and judge over us? Have you spoken to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” And [Moses] was afraid and said, “Indeed, the thing has become known.” (*Shemot* 2:13-14)

As Moses develops, he will transform from a fervent, unbridled idealist to a temperate, mature leader. As part of this process, Moses must learn to control the impetuous use of his hand. In the second incident, Moses uses speech instead of force, endeavoring to persuade the Hebrew not to strike his friend. The shift from employing his hand (against the Egyptian) to using his mouth (to coax the Israelite) mirrors the trajectory of Moses’ career. God first designates Moses to be the liberator of an enslaved nation by wielding force against the Egyptian oppressors, bringing ten plagues (or strikes, *makkot*) against them. Following the Exodus, with barely any time to adjust, God thrusts an entirely new role upon Moses. In this new role, Moses will convey the Ten Commandments (or utterances, *devarim*) to the nation of Israel, using speech as his most effective instrument.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Moses fails miserably in this verbal attempt to influence his squabbling brethren, a fact that surely influences his later lack of confidence regarding speech (“I am not a man of words, for I am heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue,” *Shemot* 4:10). In fact, speech is a much harder tool to wield; force tends to yield a faster and more efficient outcome. Still, Moses is correct that speech has advantages for a leader, and he would be well advised to develop his language skills; with speech, a leader can rally the nation to join him in a collaborative effort, fostered by mutual respect.

Scornfully dismissive of Moses’ efforts to encourage camaraderie, the Israelite man fulminates against Moses’ presumptuous interference. In words that recall the lawlessness of Sodom in *Bereishit* 19:9 (“Has one come here to live, and instead he judges?”), the Hebrew rages: “Who appointed you the man to be officer and judge over us?” (*Shemot* 2:14). The Hebrew’s defiant disrespect directs our attention to later events in Moses’ career, auguring the difficulties that Moses will face as leader of a disobedient Israelite nation. Yehuda Raday observes an overall chiastic arrangement (yet another indication of the masterful construction of *Shemot* 2) in which the confrontation between Moses and the wicked Hebrew appears at the core:[[9]](#footnote-9)

A: 1-4 – Marriage and birth.

B: 5-10 – Pharaoh’s daughter brings Moses into her home.

C: 11-12 – Moses saves his brethren from Egyptians.

D: 13-14 – Moses’ brethren deny him.

C’: 15-17 – Moses saves the Midianite girls.

B’: 18-20 – Re’uel’s daughters bring Moses into their home.

A’: 21-22 – Marriage and Birth.

Several ideas come into sharper focus when we look at this structure. Its periphery (A and A’) constitutes a triumphant frame, heralding Pharaoh’s failure to abort Moses or his line. The next circle (B and B’) draws a parallel between Pharaoh’s daughter and Yitro, two non-Israelites who welcome Moses into their homes. Moses’s moral inclinations grow roots in these homes, outside of the nation of Israel; his ultimate objectives will surely resonate outward, impacting the broader world. The following ring (C and C’) illustrates Moses’ instinctive moral acts, as we discussed above.

In Raday’s view, this structure is designed to highlight its core (D), forecasting the treacheries that Moses will experience throughout his career. In contrast to the non-Israelites who welcome him (in B and B’), Moses’ brethren will repeatedly deny him, as they spew an unending litany of complaints (*Shemot* 16:2; *Bamidbar* 17:6), foster mutiny and insurrection against him (*Shemot* 17:2; *Bamidbar* 14:4), and even threaten his life (*Shemot* 17:4). Moses will be betrayed by his own tribesmen (*Bamidbar* 16:1-3, 8-11) and by his siblings (*Bamidbar* 12:1-2). The confrontation between Moses and the Hebrew men is a pivotal episode, spawning Moses’ despair and flight – not just from Egypt but also from his undeserving brethren.

Yet, even while Raday’s structure is compelling, it seems doubtful that the Bible would wish to cast its limelight in this chapter upon Moses’ difficult relationship with his brethren. I would argue that the main goal of this central incident is the very opposite: to draw our attention to Moses’ attempt to forge unity between brothers. Moses’ censure of the Israelite man is likely spoken with heartbreak rather than harshness; his use of the word *rei’ekha*, “your friend,” bespeaks a deep desire to forge fellowship and good relations. At its core, the centerpiece of Moses’ formative narrative illustrates his bid to implement what will become a central tenet of the Torah: “You shall love your friend (*rei’akha*) as yourself” (*Vayikra* 19:18).[[10]](#footnote-10)

In any case, I am more inclined to view all three incidents together as the center of this narrative unit. These episodes (C, D, and C’) link together to sketch a magnificent portrait of Moses, by focusing attention on the common denominator that lies beneath his behavior: Moses cannot tolerate injustice or cruelty. Moses always acts swiftly to eliminate immorality, no matter the circumstances. It is a grave understatement of Moses’ persona to define it by the betrayals of others. Moses’ life involves a perpetual, indefatigable quest for justice, which ultimately leads him to set up the infrastructure for constructing a moral society, one that is designed to impact outward upon the broader world.

**Fear and Flight: The Outcome of Episode #2**

The Hebrew ruffian indicates to Moses that his impulsive murder of the Egyptian is common knowledge (“Have you spoken to kill me *as you killed the Egyptian*?”), a tossed-off comment surely intended as a threat. Indeed, Moses reacts with fear (*va-yira* *Moshe*), exclaiming, “Indeed, the thing has become known!” In the following verse (2:15), Pharaoh hears of the incident and seeks to kill Moses – at which point, in contrast to the unflinching courage that Moses exhibits several times over the course of this chapter, he falters and flees from Pharaoh’s powerful reach.

Some Rabbinic traditions found the portrayal of a frightened Moses unconvincing, his fear uncharacteristic of the brave and principled young man we have met thus far. If Moses had truly wanted to remain in Egypt to champion the cause of his brethren, he would surely overcome his fear of Pharaoh’s reprisals. Instead, his flight from Egypt seems more like a deliberate abandonment of his people, who have sorely disappointed him. This approach fits in nicely with later events, in which Moses repeatedly refuses to accede to God’s directive to return to Egypt and liberate his brethren (*Shemot* 3:11-4:13). According to one oft-cited Rabbinic tradition, Moses is initially confounded by what he sees as the unjust torment of the Israelites – that is, until he sees the way they conduct themselves, at which point it dawns on Moses that the Hebrews are an undeserving lot.[[11]](#footnote-11) The Hebrew man’s depravity is what triggers Moses’ agitation and flight, as it dawns on him that their suffering is justified, and that Israel is unredeemable. Rashi cites this tradition, even though he acknowledges that it is not the simple meaning of verse 14: [[12]](#footnote-12)

**And Moses became afraid.** There is a simple meaning. And its midrashic [meaning] is that [Moses] was worried when he saw that Israel had wicked people who were informers, and he said, “Now I am afraid lest they are not deserving of redemption!”

**Indeed, the thing has become known!** As its simple meaning. And its midrashic [meaning] is that [Moses says], “It has become known to me the things that I was confounded by: what was [so terrible in] Israel’s sin – more than all seventy nations – that they are tormented by hard labor? But now I see that they deserve it.” (Rashi, *Shemot* 2:14)

In this reading, once Moses sees Israel’s immoral behavior, he both understands and accepts their plight, regarding it as due recompense for their actions. Alluding to his new understanding of a corrupted Israel, Moses exclaims: “Indeed, the thing has become known!” In despair or anger, or perhaps a mixture of the two, Moses flees from Egypt, with no intention of ever returning.

Egyptian society has produced only wickedness; taskmasters and slaves coalesce and merge in a tangled web of corruption and cruelty. The liberator of the oppressed has no one to save in Egypt; everyone is steeped in rampant wickedness.

**Episode #3: Moses Saves Midianite girls from Midianite Shepherds**

Moses rapidly departs from the moral shambles of Egyptian society and decamps to Midian. Midian may be a geographical location (“the land of Midian” 2:15), or it may refer to an area inhabited by a group of semi-nomadic tribes (the Midianites).[[13]](#footnote-13) A semi-nomadic lifestyle is an understandable destination for one who has turned away in disgust from the foibles of “civilized” society. And yet, uncivilized behavior follows Moses as he moves away from Egypt towards Midian, where he again encounters injustice.

And Moses fled from Pharaoh, and he settled in the land of Midian and sat by the well. The priest of Midian had seven daughters and they came and drew [water] and they filled the troughs to water their father’s flocks. But the shepherds arrived, and they banished [the flocks].[[14]](#footnote-14) And so Moses arose, and he rescued them, and he watered their flocks. (*Shemot* 2:15-17)

The third episode of Moses’ young adult life occurs outside of Egypt, where he discovers that acts of cruelty are not limited to one immoral society; they are part of human nature. Moses cannot find a settled area free of wickedness. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Moses will wind up spending most of his time in the desert while in Midian (“And he led the sheep into the desert,” *Shemot* 3:1). In the least habitable place, Moses is unlikely to encounter humans, and may finally avoid the specter of human corruption. Moses contentedly ambles with his sheep in the lonesome desert until God calls him to duty, interrupting Moses’ solipsistic existence by reminding him of his social responsibility. The lessons that Moses learns from his encounters with human cruelty will accompany him throughout his life’s journey. Moses will set his sights on setting up a just society, one suffused with justice and civility and driven by compassion for the weak and vulnerable.

1. Biblical interpreters disagree on the matter of Moses’ intent when he swivels around in fruitless search of a man. Netziv posits that Moses is searching for a righteous Egyptian, while R’ Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg (*Ha-Ketav Ve-Ha-Kabbala*) thinks he is seeking a Hebrew who is willing to help his brethren. The argument points to different possible reasons for Moses’ disillusionment at this incident: Is he observing the prevailing wickedness among the Egyptian populace, or the abiding passivity that slavery has produced among the Hebrews? [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. To align with the acts of later Levites, *Shemot Rabba* 1:29 presents Moses’ act in *Shemot* 2 as zealotry for God’s honor, even though Moses does not mention God and will only encounter Him for the first time at the burning bush (*Shemot* 3). This *midrash* may be designed to find a spiritual side to Moses at the outset of his story. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Moses’ passion for God will emerge later, becoming a hallmark of his persona. We see his zealotry particularly clearly in *Shemot* 32:19, when he impulsively breaks the tablets in response to Israel’s egregious sin. On another note, many Rabbinic sources identify Elijah with Pinchas, probably because Elijah’s fiery persona recalls that of Pinchas and the Levites. While the Tanakh never identifies Elijah’s tribe, some *midrashim* seem to assume he is a Levite (although others suggest alternate tribal affiliations). For more on this, see Radak, *I Melachim* 17:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. To explain Moses’ impetuous act, Ramban simply states that Moses could not bear to see the suffering of his brethren (Ramban, *Shemot* 2:12). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rabbinic sources tend to justify Moses’ action, which receives no censure in the text. *Avot De-Rabbi Natan* (*Nuscha Aleph*) 20 and *Shemot Rabba* 4:1 sketch a scenario in which Moses only acts *after* he has convened a heavenly court and received a summary judgement from the angels to kill the Egyptian. Other Rabbinic sources (e.g. *Shemot* *Rabba* 1:29) explain that Moses killed the Egyptian by invoking God’s name, rather than by using force or weapons. In this reading, which is based on the awkward formulation of the Hebrew aggressor’s words (*Shemot* 2:14: “Have you ***spoken*** to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?”), Moses does not directly kill anyone, thereby alleviating the gravity of his vigilantism. However, in a dissenting view, *Midrash Petirat Moshe* maintains that because Moses commits this act without God’s instructions, God does not permit him to enter the land of Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Netziv’s comment on *Shemot* 2:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. As we saw with regard to Pharaoh’s daughter, human actions can spur God to act; when Moses shows that he is willing to fight for justice, God seems inclined to undertake similar steps. Consider the following examples: First Moses “sees” Israel’s oppressions (2:11); not long after, God “sees Israel” and her hardships (2:25; 3:7). After Moses saves (*natzal*) the Midianite girls from oppression (2:19), God states that He will save (*natzal*) Israel from Egypt (3:8). Moses confronts a wicked man (2:13), as will God (9:27). Fretheim, *Exodus*, pp. 42-43, notes these linguistic allusions, as do other scholars. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. We will address this issue again when Moses receives instructions from God at the burning bush, directing him to use first his hand, and then his mouth (4:1-14). After initially expressing his lack of confidence in using his mouth, Moses does succeed in completing his tasks – both of the hand and of the mouth – with distinction. Yet, his mouth remains his vulnerability, and at moments of stress, Moses will instinctively prefer his hand. Moses’ bid to switch from leadership with his hand to the use of his mouth comes to an unfortunate end in an incident that seals his fate as leader, ending his career and precluding him from entering the land of Israel. In that episode (*Bamidbar* 20:1-13), God instructs Moses to speak to a rock so that it will bring forth water. Moses instead resorts to his secure medium, raising his hand and striking the rock twice with his staff. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Raday, Y., “The Chiasm in the Biblical Story,” *Beit Mikra*, 1964, pp. 58-59. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In the same article cited above, Raday, *Chiasm*, p. 71, describes the phrase, “You shall love your friend as yourself,” (*Vayikra* 19:18) as the central axis of the five books of the Torah. In *Yerushalmi* *Nedarim* 9, R. Akiva calls this sentence the “great principle of the Torah.” In *Shemot* 18:16, Moses refers to this idea when he explains his commitment to judging the nation. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For some of the midrashic references to this tradition, see *Tanchuma* (Buber) *Va-era* 17; *Tanchuma* (Warsaw) *Shemot* 10; *Shemot* *Rabba* 1:30. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Twice in his commentary on this verse, Rashi acknowledges that he is citing a tradition that flouts the simple meaning of the text. Remarkably, Rashi still considers the less obvious interpretation worthy of mention. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, p. 35; Dumbrell, W. J. “Midian: A Land of a League?” *Vetus Testamentum* 25 (1975) pp. 323-337. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. A debate forms around the question of whether the shepherds banish the girls (e.g., Rasag, Ibn Ezra, and most exegetes) or their flocks (as indicated by the masculine form of the object of their banishing – Abravanel). In either case, the shepherds steal the water that the girls have drawn for their own flocks, so that they do not have to arduously draw water themselves. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)