**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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**From Slavery to Redemption**

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**Shiur #16:**

**Joseph and Moses:**

**From Fracture to Fraternity**

**Moses’ Final Demurral**

Following God’s assertion of divine control over Moses’ speech (his mouth), He issues a command: “And now, Go!” (4:12). Signaling that the discussion is over, God makes a promise to Moses, in a final gesture of support: “I will be with your mouth and I will instruct you of everything that you will speak” (ibid.).[[1]](#footnote-1) Yet Moses deflects God one final time, pleading wearily: “Please, my Master, send whomever You will send” (4:13). The implication is that God should send anyone at all, so long as it is not Moses. This contrasts with Moses’ initial one-word declaration of readiness: “*Hineini*!” (“Here I am” – 3:4). In this stark demurral, devoid of explanation or excuse, Moses reaches the limits of God’s tolerance. God becomes angry at Moses, the first explicit instance of divine wrath in the Tanakh.

Many exegetes believe that God’s anger necessarily brings punishment in its wake.[[2]](#footnote-2) What is Moses’ punishment? Some commentators point to the appointment of Aaron as Moses’ spokesman.[[3]](#footnote-3) Immediately following God’s wrath, we meet Aaron for the first time: “And God’s anger was inflamed at Moses, and He said, ‘Is that not Aaron, your brother, the Levite? He, I know, speaks readily” (4:14). In a sharp pivot from God’s focused attention upon Moses (opening with God’s call, “Moses Moses!” in 3:4), God shifts His attention away from Moses and selects another figure to function in a key role in the upcoming events.

But how can Aaron’s role be a punishment for Moses? This appointment should please Moses, who now has a spokesperson to alleviate his sense of inadequacy, as well as a companion who can support him in his mission. Exegetes search for the punitive element in Aaron’s appointment. Rashi, for example, focuses upon Aaron’s epithet, “the Levite,” maintaining that God hereby informs Moses that due to his refusals to assume his duties, the priesthood has been taken from him and given instead to his brother.[[4]](#footnote-4) Indeed, the priestly dynasty does not emerge from Moses; it is Aaron’s descendants whose “mouths” will function authoritatively in a priestly role (*Bamidbar* 27:21).[[5]](#footnote-5)

Moreover, it will later be seen that Aaron’s leadership alongside Moses does not always work out well; Aaron’s presence often undermines Moses. Aaron’s role in the Golden Calf episode angers God, forcing Moses to pray on his behalf (*Devarim* 9:20). Aaron will eventually join Miriam in casting aspersions on Moses’ leadership (*Bamidbar* 12). That episode draws linguistically from our chapter in various ways (as we observed in last week’s *shiur*), suggesting that it emerged from God’s decision to assign Aaron a leadership role. Moses’ fateful mistake in hitting the rock – an error that marks the end of his leadership – is undertaken with Aaron at his side (*Bamidbar* 20:2-13) and results in God disqualifying them both from leading Israel into the land.

Nevertheless, Moses does not appear to view Aaron as a liability. Nor does Aaron resent his younger brother’s divine appointment. God’s words to Moses emphasize his familial relationship to Aaron, “your brother,” and follow that by assuring Moses that, “[Aaron] will see you and rejoice in his heart.” In a welcome departure from earlier portrayals of negative brotherly relationships, there is no discernible hostility between Moses and Aaron.[[6]](#footnote-6) Mutual goodwill among brothers is remarkable enough for biblical commentators to comment on this instance:

Rabbanan said, Do you really think that Moses would delay going [to Egypt]? That is not so. Rather, he was acting out of respect for Aaron. Moses said “Until I was appointed, Aaron my brother prophesied in Egypt for eighty years… Now I will enter the jurisdiction of my brother and he will be pained.” For this reason, [Moses] did not wish to go. (*Shemot* *Rabba* 3:16)

The next *midrash* picks up on the same theme from the other side of the relationship, highlighting Aaron’s joy at his brother’s new appointment:

R. Shimon the son of R. Yosi said, “[Aaron’s] heart that rejoices over his brother’s greatness will wear the *Urim* *Ve-Thummim* [on his heart].” (*Shemot* *Rabba* 3:17)

Mutual respect and love define this fraternal pair, bringing an end to the prevalent trend in Bereishit, where brotherly relationships are fraught with enmity, rivalry, and even fratricide.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Joseph and his Brothers: Disunity and Disaster**

Israel’s slavery is rooted in fraternal hatred. Jealousy leads Joseph’s brothers to sell him into slavery in Egypt, paving the path toward Israel’s sojourn and enslavement there. Allusions to this deeply troubling episode of brotherly betrayal echo throughout the Exodus story, further cementing the relationship between these events.[[8]](#footnote-8)

To repair the downward spiral set in motion by the sale of Joseph, God selects Moses, whose life seems strikingly similar to that of Joseph – particularly in their respective struggles with identity in a foreign environment. Each of them marries a foreign woman, the daughter of a local priest (compare *Bereishit* 41:45 and *Shemot* 2:16, 21), siring two sons whose names reflect their father’s experience of alienation.[[9]](#footnote-9) Moses is identified in Midian as an “Egyptian man,” while Joseph is identified in Egypt as a “Hebrew man.” Both terms fail to reflect the turmoil that accompanies the quest for identity for these men, both of whom ricochet back and forth between disparate cultures.

Rather than following parallel courses, their lives mirror each other; Joseph and Moses undergo opposite trajectories. Joseph begins as a member of Jacob’s family and winds up living out his life in the palace of Egypt. In a well-known *midrash*, Joseph’s bones are buried deep in the Nile, a symbol of the depths of Joseph’s integration into Egypt.[[10]](#footnote-10) Moses moves in the opposite direction over the course of his life. He begins as a baby hidden in the reeds of the Nile, moves to the Egyptian palace, and concludes his life amidst his brethren.

Moses does not simply reverse Joseph’s personal downward trajectory; he will rectify the whole unfortunate saga, which began with family fracture, continues with a family unraveled, enslaved, and flailing in a hostile land, and will conclude with Moses leading a liberated nation out of Egypt and toward their shared destiny.

**Joseph in Egypt**

Joseph’s descent to Egypt launches with Jacob, who sends Joseph on an ill-advised journey (***lekha*** ***ve-eshlachakha***,” *Bereishit* 37:13), to check on the welfare of his brothers (*re’eih* *et* ***shlom******achekha***, 37:14) who are shepherding in Shekhem. Joseph cannot easily find his brothers, who have moved from Shekhem to Dotan. Wandering aimlessly, he is assisted by an unnamed man who guides him to Dotan after Joseph informs him that he seeks his brethren (*et* ***echai*** *anokhi mevakesh*, 37:16). In an insidious twist, when the brothers see Joseph, their hatred flares. They initially plot to kill him, but instead they wind up selling Joseph to Ishmaelite merchants heading towards Egypt. These itinerant traders take Joseph down to Egypt as part of their merchandise; Joseph arrives in Egypt amidst camels laden with spices (37:25).

Jacob is deeply affected by the disappearance of Joseph. The brothers show him Joseph’s special cloak, which they have dipped in blood, and he naturally assumes that his beloved son is dead. The bereft father refuses consolation (*va-yema’ein* *le’hitnachem*, 37:35); Jacob’s pain will only be alleviated when he is reunited with Joseph. Likewise, Joseph appears preoccupied by thoughts of his father; years later, when Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers, his first question is whether his father is still alive (*ani* *Yosef* ***ha’od*** *avi* ***chai***, 45:3). Joseph then reassures his frightened brothers, asserting that the events were orchestrated by God, who “sent” Joseph to Egypt to keep the family alive during the famine (45:5-8).

**Moses in Egypt**

Moses’ leadership begins when God selects him at the burning bush, assigning him responsibility for his suffering brethren in Egypt. If in the Joseph story, one had to probe to find God’s involvement, here God explicitly sends Moses to Egypt, using words that recall Jacob’s words to Joseph: ***lekha*** ***ve-eshlachakha*** (3:10). After repeatedly resisting this mission, in 4:18, Moses finally seems ready to embark. Using a Joseph-like phrase, Moses informs Yitro that he wishes to see if his brothers are alive (***ha’odam******ba-chaim***, *Shemot* 4:18). Recalling Jacob’s words to Joseph, Yitro approves Moses’ journey, offering blessings that he should go in peace (***lekh*** *le’****shalom***) to his brothers. A significant goal of Moses’ journey is to repair his relationship with his Israelite brethren (*ve-ashuva el* ***achai***), whom he had abandoned many years prior. This is a *tikkun* (repair) and a symbol of a turnaround in fraternal relations, producing the beginning of the coalescence of the nation.

Following Yitro’s blessing, God again instructs Moses to go to Egypt, assuring him that, “all of those who sought your life are dead” (4:19). Who are these vague antagonists of Moses, and why has Moses not mentioned them as a reason for his hesitation to go to Egypt? The simplest explanation is that God refers to Pharaoh, who indeed sought to kill Moses (2:15) and died in *Shemot* 2:23.[[11]](#footnote-11) However, God does not explicitly reference the Egyptian king, leaving this open to interpretation. Possibly, God refers to Moses’ Hebrew brethren, the men who rejected Moses’ pleas for justice and implicitly threatened his life.[[12]](#footnote-12) Those men symbolize societal discord within Israel; they denied the family ties between them and caused Moses to lose faith in his brethren.[[13]](#footnote-13) Animosity between brothers, especially when it leads to nefarious plots or physical altercations, rips apart a family or a nation, casting doubt over its future. When God informs Moses that the men who seek his life (***ha-mevakshim*** *et* *nafshekha*) are dead, He may be hinting to Moses that the nation is ripe for unity, that those who sow conflict are no longer. The word *mevakesh* (to seek) recalls Joseph’s plaintive quest for his brothers, which led him, in a terrible twist, to jealousy, enmity, and the threat of death.[[14]](#footnote-14) In contrast, God’s assurance, using the same Hebrew root, prepares Moses to return to his people with the renewed faith that he can forge a nation rooted in fraternal goodwill.

Moses responds to God’s instruction by saddling his family on a donkey, headed for Egypt. The donkey has long been a curiosity for exegetes.[[15]](#footnote-15) Why does the Tanakh spotlight the beast that transports them? Perhaps the donkey is presented in contrast to the caravan of camels that transported Joseph on his haphazard and coerced journey. Unlike the hapless Joseph, Moses and family make their way to Egypt of their own accord, riding astride a donkey, which takes them on a purposeful and directed journey.[[16]](#footnote-16)

In a final connection to the Joseph story, recall that Joseph’s father, Jacob, suffers deeply from the family schism, and especially from Joseph’s disappearance. Refusing comfort (*va-yema’ein* *le’hitnachem*), Jacob plunges into perpetual mourning for his beloved son (*Bereishit* 37:35). Likewise, God emerges in our passage (4:22) as a deeply concerned Father, willing to act on behalf of His mistreated *bekhor* (eldest son).[[17]](#footnote-17) The word “refuse” (*va-tema’ein*) appears again in our passage, describing Pharaoh’s anticipated stubborn refusal to release God’s firstborn, Israel (*Shemot* 4:23). While these scenarios are not entirely analogous, the allusions to the Joseph story throughout this passage seem clear. As Moses makes his way down to Egypt to assume responsibility for his brethren, the fractured nation stirs to life, ripe to repair the painful schisms of the past and pave the way for future unity. Camaraderie will replace rivalry, as shared experiences and a common enemy compel the Hebrew slaves to draw together. While Joseph’s mission to Shekhem ended in near fratricide, Moses’ mission will lead to nationhood, bringing the story of the rift between Joseph and his brothers to a felicitous conclusion.

1. Chizkuni suggests that the first part of the promise is that God will heal Moses’ speech defect. Abravanel posits that God will arrange words for him so that Moses will not have to employ those letters that were causing him trouble. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Zevachim* 102a and Rashi and Rashbam on *Shemot* 4:14. This approach seems determined to avoid the implication that God is affected by emotions like humans. While these exegetes assume the text only mentions God’s anger when it has a punitive consequence, Ibn Ezra (*Peirush* *Sheni*) on *Shemot* 4:14 disagrees, citing *Bamidbar* 12:9 as another example where God’s anger has no practical consequence. *Vaykira Rabba* 11:6 suggests that God’s anger here results in the punitive decree that Moses will not enter the land. We will examine Rashbam’s approach to Moses’ punishment in a later chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Contrast Nachmanides, who sees Aaron’s appointment as a great honor for Moses. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The idea that Moses was initially designated for priesthood is based on *Zevachim* 102a and *Shemot* *Rabba* 3:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Bamidbar* 27:21 describes the role of Elazar, the priest, whose mouth is mentioned twice in his role inquiring of the *Urim* *Ve-Thummim*: “in accordance with his mouth will they go out and in accordance with his mouth they will come in.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Goodwill and collaboration hold sway between the brothers throughout the story of the Exodus, although, as noted above, some tension arises during the sojourn in the desert when Aaron seems to band together with Miriam to question Moses’ superior prophetic role. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See also *Tanchuma* *Shemot* 27 and *Shemot* *Rabba* 5:1, which beautifully describe the significance of Moses and Aaron’s fraternal love. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. I will examine these allusions throughout this study. For the moment, I will cite as an example the multiple linguistic similarities between the description (*Bereishit* 37:31) of Joseph’s brothers slaughtering an animal and dipping (*taval*) Joseph’s coat in the blood (to deceive their father) and the description at the conclusion of Israel’s enslavement (*Shemot* 12:21-22), when the Israelites are instructed to slaughter an animal and dip (*taval*) a hyssop bunch into blood to daub on the lintel and doorposts in Egypt (so that God will pass over their houses). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The different etymologies of the names of the sons of Joseph (Menasseh and Ephraim) and Moses (Gershom and Eliezer) reflect a gradual reconciliation with their respective situations. While Menasseh’s name reflects Joseph’s sense of being cut off from his father’s house, Ephraim’s name radiates confidence that God has remained with him in the land of his suffering (*Bereishit* 41:51-52). Similarly, Gershom’s name reflects Moses’ painful experience of alienation, while Eliezer’s name portrays Moses’ gratitude to God for continuing to rescue him (*Shemot* 18:3-4). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See *Sota* 13a; *Tanchuma* *Beshalach* 2; *Shemot* *Rabba* 20:19. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Rashi, Rashbam, and Ibn Ezra, who cite this approach. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Avoda Zara* 5a identifies the unnamed Hebrew men as Datan and Aviram. See also Malbim on 4:19. Although only one of the men spoke during that incident (*Shemot* 2:14), presumably he reflects the attitude of both men. Chizkuni and Malbim offer another explanation, suggesting that God refers to the Egyptian relatives of the man Moses killed in *Shemot* 2:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This could explain why Moses does not seem to express actual fear about returning to Egypt, but simply mistrust of the people (e.g. *Shemot* 4:1). As Benno Jacob notes, had Moses been afraid for his life, he surely would have mentioned that to God! [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Certainly, Joseph’s brothers are long dead, as noted explicitly in the opening of the book (*Shemot* 1:6). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Some Rabbinic sources (e.g., *Tanchuma* *Shemot* 22 and *Shemot* *Rabba* 5:5) suggest that this verse spawned one of the changes made by the Greek translators of the Bible, who apparently found it demeaning that the family of the great Moses rode on such a lowly beast. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Journeys on donkeys tend to be focused and purposeful (e.g., Abraham going to sacrifice his son, Achsa going to plead with her father for better land, Abigail’s journey to prevent David from bloodshed), unlike caravans of camels, which appear to be associated with commercial expeditions (perhaps even the camels featured in Abraham’s servant’s journey to fetch Rebecca should be viewed in this light). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Joseph, the eldest son of Jacob’s beloved Rachel, seems to be perceived by Jacob as his *bekhor*. See I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 5:1, where Joseph’s status as the *bekhor* is explicitly noted. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)