**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**From Slavery to Redemption**

**Dr. Yael Ziegler**

**Shiur #17:**

**Journey to Egypt:**

**Fathers and Sons**

A series of disjointed vignettes bridges the dialogue between God and Moses at Horeb (*Shemot* 3:1-4:17) and Moses’ actual arrival in Egypt, where he finally launches his mission (4:27-29). First, Moses returns to Yitro, requesting and receiving permission to go to Egypt (4:18). Moses explains that he wishes to see if his brethren are still alive, omitting any mention of his encounter with God or his appointment as divine emissary of deliverance. The next verse (19) cuts abruptly to God’s instructions (again!) that Moses should return to Egypt, concluding with a divine assurance that everyone seeking Moses’ life is dead. Staff in hand, Moses takes his wife and sons and saddles them on a donkey to head back to Egypt (20). At this point, God speaks again to Moses, informing him that events will unfold in a predictable manner: Moses will do great wonders, Pharaoh’s heart will be hardened, and he will refuse to release God’s firstborn (Israel), in response to which God will kill Pharaoh’s firstborn (21-23). This correlation is no less surprising for its matter-of-fact representation, as though it is obvious that God’s relationship to Israel should be equated with Pharaoh’s relationship to his eldest son.

Matters take an even stranger twist when the family stops for lodging, where God “seeks to kill” an unnamed person (syntactically, Moses seems the likely victim). Tzippora deflects that threat by circumcising her son and touching it (the foreskin? the blood?)[[1]](#footnote-1) to his legs, followed by two cryptic statements about a bridegroom of blood.

These incidents do not cohere together easily, nor are they readily comprehensible. The episode at the lodge is especially confounding, leaving more that is enigmatic than clear.

I do not propose to offer a definitive or fully satisfying explanation for this puzzling series of episodes. I will, however, suggest some pathways for obtaining a deeper understanding of the various incidents and the ideas that bind them together.

**Moses and Yitro; Moses and his Brethren**

This section (4:18-26) involves matters of kinship, primarily vertical – namely, matters of fathers and sons – but also lateral (fraternity). The episodes focus our attention upon life and death, noting who wields that power.

Moses’ first act following his conversation with God is to “go [from the bush] and return” to Yitro (using the words *lekh* and *shuv*). Moses’ fidelity to Yitro stems from his father-in-law’s unfailing kindness and paternal role.[[2]](#footnote-2) Upon returning to Yitro, Moses’ attention shifts to his loyalty to his brethren, using the same verbs to request permission from Yitro to go (*lekh*) and return (*shuv*) to Egypt.

This pivot is not necessarily expected, given Moses’ hasty departure from Egypt and subsequent resistance to assume responsibility for the rescue of his brethren. Moses expresses little loyalty or regard for Israel throughout his extensive dialogue with God. Perhaps his newfound allegiance is simply a ruse to convince Yitro to give him leave. Alternatively, Moses may be genuinely – and gradually – acquiring loyalty, as a result of his encounter with God. Moreover, God’s reference to “Aaron, your brother” (in 4:14) may well remind Moses of his more direct fraternal loyalties, galvanizing him to reclaim his identity and rejoin his brethren. To do so, Moses must take leave of Yitro, loosening his ties of kinship with the man who embraced him during the period of his estrangement from his nation. From this point forward, Moses devotes all his energies to his people.

We have seen (in previous *shiurim*) that the relationship between Yitro and Moses was founded on a common quest for decency, rather than shared spiritual views. This can explain why Moses does not apprise his father-in-law of the divine nature of his mission. Instead, he speaks in a more personal vein, expressing a desire to see whether his brethren are still alive. Yitro’s decency facilitates his appreciation for Moses’ concerns, and he acquiesces to Moses’ request. Yitro is no Laban: this father-in-law blesses his son-in-law, allowing him to leave in peace and – we will see shortly – to take his wife and sons with him.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Moses and his Family**

The fact that Moses takes his wife and children with him on this journey, in which he is meant to focus on God’s mission, has prompted lively debate among biblical commentators, who offer quite disparate views. Some view Moses’ act as a demonstration of continued denial of his mission; taking his family along suggests a lack of seriousness of purpose.[[4]](#footnote-4) For the Hebrew slaves, it may appear that Moses intends to relocate his family in Egypt, preventing them from regarding Moses as their savior.[[5]](#footnote-5) The text, moreover, depicts Moses placing his family on a donkey – presumably while he walks alongside, suggesting a sluggish or leisurely journey.[[6]](#footnote-6) This is an odd portrait for the urgently needed redeemer; later in Tanakh, Zechariah will describe Israel’s redeemer arriving astride a donkey himself, with no family in tow (*Zekharia* 9:9). This critique of Moses could explain why God soon thwarts Moses’ family at the lodge, perhaps prompting Tzippora and their sons to return to Yitro until the Israelites are safely out of Egypt.[[7]](#footnote-7)

On the other hand, some exegetes see Moses’ decision to bring his family to Egypt as a courageous act designed to bring hope to a beleaguered nation. In Nachmanides’ view, the fact that Moses brings his own family to live among the oppressed slaves indicates Moses’ certainty that liberation will soon occur. An even more positive portrayal suggests that Moses wishes his family to witness God’s deeds and be active participants in the Exodus and the subsequent events at Mount Sinai:

Yitro said to him, “To where are you taking them?” [Moses] replied, “To Egypt.” [Yitro] said to him, “They who are in Egypt wish to leave, and you bring them [there]?!” [Moses] replied, “Soon they will exit [Egypt] and then they will stand on Mount Sinai and hear from God’s mouth: ‘I am your God.’ Will my children not hear this along with them?” Immediately Yitro responded, “Go in peace.” (*Shemot* *Rabba* 4:4)[[8]](#footnote-8)

If Moses is motivated by the desire to link his family’s fortunes to that of Israel, that would seem to be praiseworthy indeed!

The controversy remains unresolved. In any case, Tzippora and her sons do not remain with Moses in Egypt. The next time we encounter Moses’ family will be after the Exodus, when Yitro brings them from Midian to meet Moses in the desert, at the mountain of God (*Shemot* 18:2-5).

**Life and Death**

Moses’ journey to Egypt is laced with references to life and death. Moses expresses concern for his brethren: “I will return to my brothers in Egypt, and I will see if they are still *living*.” Moses certainly intends to clarify whether his brethren have survived the maelstrom of Egyptian slavery, but he also wishes to know whether they remain vibrant. Do the enslaved Hebrews retain hope and vigor as well as the will to emerge from the fetters of slavery and rebuild their lives?

Moses’ hopeful words are offset by references to death. God speaks here only of death, beginning with verse 19, when He informs Moses of the *deaths* of those in Egypt who sought Moses’ *death*.[[9]](#footnote-9) God mentions death again in verse 23, when He declares His intention to kill Pharaoh’s firstborn son in retribution for Pharaoh’s mistreatment of God’s firstborn. Death, not life, swirls around Egypt, threatening to engulf the Hebrew slaves in its maw.

The final encounter with death in this passage is less comprehensible, stunning the reader with its brevity and opaqueness. God meets Moses in the lodge on the way to Egypt, and “He seeks to kill him.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Why would God seek to kill his messenger? Possibly, this portends upcoming events, illustrating that death prowls the roads that lead to Egypt. Indeed, anyone making their way to Egypt should expect death. After all, Pharaoh has created a society of evil, dispensing death cruelly and capriciously. Yet, it is God – not Pharaoh – Who brings a threat of death in these verses. Here, as Moses makes his way to Egypt, the story shifts, revealing a glimpse of God’s absolute power and foreshadowing the calamity that God intends to bring upon Egypt – and upon Pharaoh in particular. At the crux of this section, God charges Moses to bring a direct message of death to the Egyptian king himself. Perhaps this section, fraught with death, contains an instructive message for Moses: if God is the ultimate force that determines when Moses’ death will come, then Moses should not fear the evil designs of humans but should instead carefully obey the all-powerful God.

Still, why would God send a message – any kind of message – by threatening the life of His newly appointed emissary? Initially, God’s message of death brings good news to Moses personally, reassuring him that those in Egypt who sought (*bakesh*) to kill Moses have died (4:19). The word *bakesh* recalls Pharaoh’s earlier bid to kill Moses (2:15), prompting Moses’ flight from Egypt; it is quite likely that God references that specific Pharaoh’s death here.[[11]](#footnote-11) Shockingly, however, the word *bakesh* (to seek) reappears in this short section, with the same meaning (“to seek to kill”) – only this time, it is God who seeks to kill Moses (4:24).

**God Encountered “Him” and Sought to Kill “Him”**

To begin to resolve the problem, let us turn our attention to the verses that precede God’s attempt on Moses’ life. God tells Moses exactly what to say to Pharaoh after Pharaoh refuses to release the nation:[[12]](#footnote-12)

And you shall say to Pharaoh, “So says God, ‘My son, My eldest, is Israel. And I said to you, “Send out My son so he will serve Me, and you refused to send him. Behold, I will kill your eldest son.” (*Shemot* 4:22-23)

God prepares Moses to inform Pharaoh of the final and decisive plague: the death of the firstborn children.[[13]](#footnote-13) Like many of the plagues, this one is presented as a fitting punishment, measure for measure.[[14]](#footnote-14) Pharaoh’s abuse of God’s firstborn prompts God to cut down Pharaoh’s firstborn; this indicates God’s willingness to sever Pharaoh’s dynasty. These words also convey something new about the nature of God’s relationship with Israel, who is metaphorically designated as God’s firstborn. Other nations may be regarded as God’s children, but Israel will become the nation devoted to serving Him.[[15]](#footnote-15) Israel will assume the privileged and taxing responsibility of leadership among the family of nations, guiding the other nations to serve God.[[16]](#footnote-16)

God’s threat to Pharaoh flows seamlessly into the episode in which God encounters “him” (presumably Moses) and wishes to kill “him.” In a peculiar move, Tzippora swiftly deflects God’s intentions by circumcising her son. This sequence of events hardly coheres together, leaving the reader with many questions, fundamental to a basic understanding of the narrative. Firstly, who is the “him” that God wishes to kill? Secondly, why does God wish to kill him? While I have thus far assumed the intended victim was Moses, the protagonist of this overall section, many exegetes assume “him” refers to one of Moses’ sons. After all, Tzippora employs circumcision of the son as a solution to the threatening situation (we will explore this notion more in the next *shiur*). Yet, if the intended victim is Moses’ son, then we must clarify which son, and also why God would seek to kill him. These questions and others remain nearly impossible to resolve beyond doubt. Uncertainty weaves through this brief, disturbing episode, leaving the reader to speculate on its surface meaning as well as on its deeper messages.

In a creative stroke, R’ Joseph Kimhi proposes connecting the incident at the lodge (4:24-26) with the verse that precedes it.

“And I said to you, ‘Send out My son so he will serve Me,’ but you refused to send him. Behold, I will kill your eldest son.” (*Shemot* 4:23)

In verse 22, God instructs Moses to inform Pharaoh that Israel is God’s firstborn. Unsurprisingly, therefore, most readers assume that verse 23 contains a message of death for Pharaoh’s eldest son, due to Pharaoh’s stubborn refusal to release Israel. However, verse 23 contains no names, leaving open the possibility that God’s threat is not directed toward Pharaoh, but is instead directed to Moses![[17]](#footnote-17)

“And I said to **you** [Moses], ‘Send out My son so he will serve Me,’ but **you** [Moses] refused to send him. Behold, I will kill your eldest son.” (*Shemot* 4:23)

Moses has repeatedly refused to assume a role in facilitating Israel’s Exodus from slavery, thereby preventing them from properly serving God. This finally aroused God’s anger at the conclusion of his dialogue with Moses at the burning bush (*Shemot* 4:14). And now, although Moses has finally embarked upon the journey, he still seems to display reluctance.[[18]](#footnote-18) This may be indicated (as previously noted) by the fact that he takes his wife and young children along on his divine mission. The text may also portray Moses’ lack of enthusiasm by focusing upon his stop for lodging;[[19]](#footnote-19) while on the way to an urgent task, the narrative slows down, mirroring Moses’ plodding, halfhearted journey toward Egypt. Moses’ willingness to allow God’s firstborn (Israel) to languish in slavery may result in God’s threat to kill *Moses’* firstborn son.[[20]](#footnote-20)

While Moses’ foot-dragging seems less egregious than Pharaoh’s sustained torment of Israel, the above reading does have merit. It explains the background of the cryptic episode at the lodge, suggesting that it is divine punishment for Moses’ behavior and identifying a consequence of God’s anger in 4:14. In this reading, Moses’ punishment is not Aaron’s appointment (which, as we previously discussed, hardly seems like a punishment for Moses) but rather the measure-for-measure bid to kill Moses’ son.[[21]](#footnote-21) Even if this reading of God’s threatening words in verse 23 is not the simplest sense of the narrative, it likely reveals a deeper layer of its meaning. Shockingly, the dual sense of the narrative yields a peculiar correlation between Pharaoh and Moses, both of whom deny God’s firstborn, spawning divine anger and retribution.

**Fathers and Sons**

This series of episodes is held together by a focus upon kinship, particularly the relationship between fathers and sons. Moses leaves Yitro (his father-in-law) to follow God’s directions to return to his brethren in Egypt. Moses does not, however, abandon his sons, deciding instead that they will accompany him. God declares that Israel is His firstborn son. And according to the simplest sense of the narrative, Pharaoh’s firstborn son is threatened. Perhaps Moses’ son is threatened as well; Moses’ son certainly plays a key role in the final episode, when Tzippora deflects danger by circumcising him. Thus, four sets of fathers and sons emerge in this passage.

It is unsurprising that the theme of fathers and sons accompanies the beginning of Moses’ journey. Moses’ first objective is to persuade Israel that God has remembered His relationship with their forefathers (*Shemot* 3:6, 15, 16; 4:5) and intends to set in motion the promises that He made to them. Paternal relationships establish authority and create continuity, factors that will facilitate Israel’s trust in God’s authority and in His loyalty to the intergenerational covenant that He forged with their forefathers (*Shemot* 2:24).[[22]](#footnote-22)

Yet the situation between fathers and sons is not so simple. God threatens to sever the relationship between Pharaoh and his son, symbolizing, perhaps, the dissolution of authority and continuity for the Egyptian monarchy. More peculiarly, God’s instructions to Moses seem to indicate that – for the moment, at least – Moses must sideline his vertical relationships: first with Yitro, and then also possibly with his son. It appears that, following the incident at the lodge, Tzippora and the children return to Yitro and do not accompany Moses to Egypt. Perhaps Moses is being told that he must concentrate fully on the only father-son relationship that matters in this narrative: God and Israel. All other matters must be put aside for the present to attend to this urgent and critical one.

I would posit that the message to Moses stretches beyond this precise circumstance, extending to the length of his life and career, a prelude to his singular legacy. Moses’ father does not appear in his birth story and has no significant role in his life.[[23]](#footnote-23) Curiously, Moses’ sons also do not feature significantly in his life or future. While this is not the usual ideal of transmitting tradition, it seems that Moses’ role is deliberately not vertical, but horizontal. His is not the classic version of tradition (*massora*), whereby one receives teachings from his father and transmits them to his sons.

Moses is a one-generational leader, who does not receive leadership from his father nor transmit it to his sons. More significantly, Moses’ unique contribution – the giving of the Torah – appears to require a total focus on the nation, rather than the usual focus on the family. On the way to Moshe’s assuming the mantle of leadership, God prepares him for his inimitable role, focusing Moses’ attention away from his own family and toward the nation, all of whom are designated as God’s children.

By transmitting the Torah horizontally, Moses makes it equally accessible to the entire community of Israel. In this way, the Torah (unlike other inheritances that confer stature and majesty by birthright – namely, vertically) is given to the entire community of Israel, so that anyone who wishes to acquire it has ample opportunity to do so. In his reworking of *Avot* 4:13, Rambam formulates the endowment of Torah in contrast to the dynastic inheritance of priests and kings:

Three crowns were conferred upon Israel: the crown of priesthood, the crown of royalty, and the crown of Torah. Aaron merited the crown of priesthood, as it is stated: "And it will be an eternal covenant of priesthood for him and his descendants after him" (Bamidbar 25:13). David merited the crown of royalty, as it is stated: "His seed will continue forever, and his throne will be as the sun before Me" (Tehillim 89:37). The crown of Torah is set aside, waiting and ready for each Jew, as it is stated: "The Torah [which] Moshe commanded us [is] the inheritance of the congregation of Yaakov" (Devarim 33:4). Whoever desires may come and take it. (Rambam, *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 3:1)

1. Most exegetes assume that Tzippora touches the foreskin to his legs. However, some explain that she smears the blood on his legs (e.g., R’ Avraham ben Ha-Rambam; Shadal). This may be because of Tzippora’s emphasis on the blood in her cryptic statement, or perhaps because of the linguistic parallel between this episode and the command to smear blood on the lintel and doorposts in *Shemot* 12:22. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Yitro’s paternal role toward Moses is noted by *Shemot* *Rabba* 4:2: “When God told him, ‘And now, go and I will send you to Pharaoh,’ [Moses] said to him, ‘Master of the world, I cannot, for Yitro welcomed me and opened his home for me and I am like a son to him!’” The *midrash* continues by explaining that Moshe returns to Yitro in order to ask his permission to go to Egypt. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Abravanel (*Shemot* 4:18) suggests that Yitro’s blessing, “Go in peace,” actually conveys his hesitations and concerns for Moses’ safety. According to Abravanel, this weakens Moses’ resolve, prompting God to reassure Moses in verse 19 that all those who seek his life are dead. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Rashbam on *Shemot* 4:24 and R. Joseph Kimhi, *Sefer* *Ha-Galui*, 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Ibn Ezra *Shemot* (*Peirush* *Sheni*) 4:20, who criticizes Moses for this reason. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Klitzner, *Wrestling*, p.153, suggests that by putting his family on a donkey while he walks alongside, Moses further delays his journey. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Although the text never tells us explicitly when or why, Tzippora and their sons do return to Midian at some point, rejoining Moses only after the Exodus from Egypt; *Shemot* 18:2-3 states that Moses had sent his wife back to Yitro, along with their sons. Ibn Ezra (*Peirush* *Ha-arokh*) *Shemot* 4:20 explains that Tzippora returned to Midian after the incident at the lodge. Nachmanides accepts this as a possible reading, and also suggests that perhaps Tzippora returned to Midian later in the story – after staying a while in Egypt – because she missed her father. *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael Massekhta De-Amalek* 1 suggests that Aaron convinced Moses to send his family back to Yitro when they met at the mountain of God (*Shemot* 4:27, prior to Moses’ arrival in Egypt). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This midrashic portrait veers in a different direction from my earlier portrayal of Yitro’s relationship with Moses, where spiritual matters are not a factor. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Although God’s power certainly includes His ability to give life (see, for example, I *Shemuel* 2:6, which explicitly states: “God brings death and life”), this point is not made explicitly during the course of the Exodus narrative. In fact, it is only the midwives who are described as actively bringing life in this story. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. We will soon examine the identity of the unnamed “him” whom God seeks to kill. For the moment, we will assume that it is Moses, which seems to be the simplest explanation. This is one of the most abstruse passages in the Bible, and we will continue to examine its meaning in next week’s *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See *Shemot* 2:23, which records the death of the Pharaoh. See also Rashbam and Ibn Ezra on 4:19, both of whom explain that God informs Moses here of Pharaoh’s death. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Does Moses ever say these words to Pharaoh? Nachmanides (*Shemot* 4:21) asserts that he certainly did say them, even if the verses do not say so explicitly. In the Samaritan Bible, these words appear in *Shemot* 11:4 when Moses speaks to Pharaoh in God’s name. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Shemot Rabba* 18:3 explicitly states that the plague of the firstborn struck both firstborn males and females. *Shemot Rabba* 15:12 seems to imply that the plague struck only males, although there is some debate as to whether the *midrash* means to say this. To understand this issue better, see the excellent article by my son, Yehoshua Pesach Ziegler, “Women and the Fast of the Firstborn,” *Kushta* *De-Milta* 10 (Nissan, 5783) pp. 3-16 [Hebrew]: https://kushtademilta.neocities.org/inter-page/NisanTashpag. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. To better understand this important biblical theme, see Jonathan Jacob’s book, *Measure for Measure in the Biblical Storytelling* (Alon Shvut: Tevunot, 2006), [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. According to R. Samson Raphael Hirsch on 4:22, the implication of this is that *all* the nations are considered God’s children. *Shemot* *Rabba* 5:7 explains that the task of a firstborn is to serve God. The oft-cited firstborn privilege of receiving a double portion of the inheritance (*Devarim* 21:17) does not appear to find expression as part of the theme of Israel’s role as firstborn of God. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The theme of the rejected “firstborn,” which is so ubiquitous in *Bereishit*, may be applicable here as well. After all, Israel is far from the eldest of the nations; Egypt, for example, attains nationhood long before Israel. God’s declaration may be tantamount to a rejection of the “eldest” nations in favor of Israel, who will now assume both the privilege and the onerous responsibilities of the firstborn. It may be that the theme of the rejected firstborn in *Bereishit* is designed to prepare us for this profoundly significant divine decision. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This idea is brought by Radak, citing his father, R. Joseph Kimhi. See also R. Joseph Kimhi in *Sefer* *Ha-Galui*. Ibn Ezra (*Shemot* 4:23) disapproves of this reading, calling those who adopt it “lacking in intellect.” [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Shemot* *Rabba* 4:3 asserts that Moses went on this journey against his will. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The Tanakh tends to omit these sorts of details of a journey, showing no interest in where travellers sleep or eat unless it is directly pertinent to the message of the narrative. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. In this reading, God seeks to kill Gershom, Moses’ firstborn. We will discuss this at greater length in the next *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Rashbam on *Shemot* 4:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. This can help to explain Tzippora’s act of circumcision upon the child, an act that illustrates membership in the covenant of Israel. I will expand on this point in the next *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Yitro, Moses’ adopted father figure, will play a significant role in Moses’ later career as leader, partnering with him to set up a judicial system in *Shemot* 18. Nevertheless, it appears that Moses returns to his solo leadership (against his will) when Yitro insists on returning to his land and his birthplace (*Bamidbar* 10:30) rather than accompanying Israel on its desert trek toward the promised land. While Moses clearly desires otherwise (and Yitro’s return home may actually be a factor in Moses’ leadership crisis in *Bamidbar* 11), one can speculate that this is part of the divine plan for Moses, one that shapes his particular leadership. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)