**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

**\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\***

**From Slavery to Redemption**

**Dr. Yael Ziegler**

**Shiur #18:**

**The Curious Incident at the Lodge (1):
Who is the Intended Victim?**

And it was on the journey at the lodge, and God encountered him and sought to kill him. Tzippora took a flintstone and she cut off the foreskin of her son and she touched it to his legs and said, “For you are a bridegroom of blood to me.” And he released him. Then she said, “A bridegroom of blood for circumcision.” (*Shemot* 4:24-26)

The incident at the lodge is one of the most obscure passages in the Bible and raises numerous questions about the basic facts of the narrative as well as its overall meaning.

Perhaps the most obvious question involves the identity of God’s intended victim. Is God targeting Moses or his son? If it is his son, then which son is it? While we have only heard thus far of the birth of Gershom, Moses takes his “children” with him on the journey (4:20), thereby indicating that Moses’ second son has been born.

Of no less significance is the question of God’s motivation: Why would God wish to kill any of these people? God seeks the life of Moses (or his son) as Moses is on his way to fulfill his mission as God’s messenger! Is this threatening episode punitive or educative? And why does God retract His original intent? What is the message of this passage within the context of the broader story, in which Moses has begun his journey toward Egypt to liberate his people?

Tzippora’s role in the story is particularly difficult to understand. How does she know what to do to avert danger? The utterances that accompany her act seem both repetitive and incomprehensible. Her initiative also raises a question about Moses’ absence. If the victim is not Moses but his son, then why is Moses not involved in rescuing his child from death? And why is Moses never mentioned by name throughout the entire incident?

The verses also do not clarify how exactly God tried to kill Moses (or his son), nor do they explain how Tzippora’s act of circumcision deflects the mortal danger. And why was this child not already circumcised? Whose leg does Tzippora smear (with the foreskin or its blood), and why does blood feature so prominently in her statements?

One thing seems clear: the obscurity of the passage is deliberate. This is a passage strewn with layers of meanings; pinning down any precise reading seems impossible. The above questions have been treated in various and markedly different ways by exegetes, so that unravelling the different approaches is a complex and somewhat arduous process.[[1]](#footnote-1) We will endeavor to tackle the issues with an eye toward understanding the message of this episode for Moses and for the broader biblical narrative.

**Whom does God seek to kill: Moses, Gershom, or Eliezer?**

Our exploration will revolve around the three different opinions regarding the identity of the intended victim. As I present the evidence for each approach, I will try to resolve some of the other questions as well.

And it was on their way in the lodge. And God encountered *him*, and he sought to kill *him*. (Ex. 4:24)

*Moses*

The most common assumption is that God seeks to kill Moses, who, as the protagonist of the narrative, is the most likely unnamed “him.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This would explain why Tzippora acts instead of Moses, who is struggling for his life. But if the intended victim is Moses, one must ask: Why is God interested in killing His newly appointed messenger?

Possibly, God is punishing Moses for past events: for his repeated reluctance to undertake God’s mission,[[3]](#footnote-3) for his lack of trust in Israel, or for his (as yet unnoted) failure to circumcise his son.[[4]](#footnote-4) Perhaps God wishes to punish Moses because he stopped at the lodge, instead of urgently pressing forward to get to Egypt as soon as possible. Moses also takes his family with him, which both delays his passage and may indicate a lack of seriousness of purpose, as discussed in the previous *shiur*.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Despite the harsh nature of the incident, it remains possible that God’s actions are not punitive – or not solely punitive – but educative.[[6]](#footnote-6) The encounter illustrates that God – and only God – determines who will live and who will die. Moreover, perhaps Moses is meant to learn that when his life is in danger, he should renew his commitment to serving God (such as through an act of circumcision).[[7]](#footnote-7) Indeed, circumcision will be a panacea for Israel’s precarious situation as well, deflecting the threat of death from God’s firstborn.

*Moses’ Son*

The victim may not be Moses, but rather one of his sons (either Gershom or Eliezer), both of whom accompany Moses on this journey.[[8]](#footnote-8) This is supported by the methods used by Tzippora to repel the threat, namely, circumcising her son. As a result of this act, many exegetes assume that Moses’ son is threatened with death because Moses failed to circumcise him. But why would Moses have been lax about circumcising his son, a tradition from the time of Abraham? And which son did Moses fail to circumcise?

In last week’s *shiur*, we discussed the approach of R. Joseph Kimhi, who maintains that the intended victim is Moses’ oldest son, Gershom. According to R. Kimhi, God intends to kill Moses’ firstborn son in retribution (measure for measure) for Moses’ failure to advocate for release of God’s firstborn son, Israel. Some Rabbinic sources moreover posit that Gershom was not yet circumcised.[[9]](#footnote-9) In a stunningly critical portrayal of Moses, these sources explain that Yitro struck a deal with Moses when he married Tzippora, whereby Moses agreed to dedicate his first son to idolatry – and this is why God comes to kill Moses.[[10]](#footnote-10) While this tradition names Moses as the intended victim, it offers an equally good explanation for those who would posit that Gershom is the intended victim.

A textual clue that may lend support to this approach is that the child circumcised by Tzippora is called, “*her* son,” perhaps suggesting that the child belongs more to Tzippora’s culture than to Moses’. Moreover, Moses only references God in the etymology of his second son (Eliezer);[[11]](#footnote-11) Gershom’s etymology describes Moses’ feelings of alienation.[[12]](#footnote-12) Moreover, if the incident rests upon Moses’ relationship with his father-in-law, this can explain why Tzippora uses the word “*chatan*” twice in her obscure utterances.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Alternatively, other exegetes suggest that the uncircumcised son is not Gershom, but rather the newly born Eliezer.[[14]](#footnote-14) Rashi offers two explanations for Moses’ failure to circumcise Eliezer. The first approach levels a harsh criticism at Moses, regarding him as derelict in his duties.[[15]](#footnote-15) This coheres with the portrait of Moses’ unenthusiastic attitude toward his divine appointment, which would mirror his laxness in circumcising his son.[[16]](#footnote-16) This episode then, is designed not only to compel Moses to circumcise his son, but also to infuse him with a sense of commitment to the covenant and to the mission at hand. In this schema, perhaps Tzippora touches the foreskin (or blood) to **Moses’** legs, imbuing him with the drive to move forward on his journey with newfound urgency and excitement.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Nevertheless, Rashi cites R. Yosi as reacting strongly against this accusation: “God forbid! [Moses] was not slothful. Rather, [Moses] said, ‘If I circumcise him and go on a journey, the child will be in danger for three days. And how can I delay the mission, which God commanded me to go on, for three days?’”[[18]](#footnote-18) This portrayal seem to acquit Moses of any wrongdoing. Danger to the child is a legitimate reason to delay circumcision. And Moses’ mission is indeed urgent; he cannot delay the journey. Why then, according to R. Yosi’s approach, was Moses punished?[[19]](#footnote-19)

One answer may begin with the fact that Moses’ mission is laced with danger. Confronting Pharaoh to demand Israel’s release requires both courage and faith.[[20]](#footnote-20) Moreover, rejoining the enslaved and persecuted nation is a risky act. For many years, Moses has lived outside of the bounds of the nation, unaffected by their condition and free of divine obligation. As Moses journeys to Egypt, the notion that he is unwilling to endanger his son’s life so that he can become a member of the congregation is incongruous with the essence of his mission and may well suggest that he is not fully committed to it. God threatens the child’s life not simply to punish, but also to educate Moses. Indeed, circumcision on a journey is a precarious act. But so is the journey itself. More to the point, the very act of embracing God’s covenant with the nation is a perilous proposition.

This reading draws our attention to what is undoubtedly a main point of the narrative: circumcision. A covenant of blood, the act of circumcision symbolizes membership in a nation that requires devotion to God’s service, even when there are dangers. In our next *shiur*, we will explore the significance of this act of circumcision that Tzippora does to deflect the danger.

1. The vast scholarship that this episode has spawned ranges from reasonable to farfetched. More egregiously, some scholars simply give up, yielding their commitment to serious interpretation and instead asserting that this section must be an interpolation, inserted randomly and containing no meaning for the broader narrative. I will only present those ideas that interpret this episode in a plausible and meaningful manner, while contributing to the broader theological themes of the book. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rashi and Ibn Ezra, *Shemot* 4:24. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rashbam 4:14 and Radak’s father, cited in the previous *shiur*. Buber connects the circumcision – where Tzippora removes the child’s foreskin (*orla*) – with Moses’ later self-described speech impediment (*aral sefatayim*,uncircumcised of mouth) that may impede his mission (*Shemot* 6:12, 30). We will discuss this further when we examine *Shemot* 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Nedarim* 31b. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Rashbam on 4:24. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Some scholars suggest that this incident is designed to force Moses to experience nearly losing his firstborn so that he develops empathy for this tragic situation before he lobs it as a threat against Pharaoh. This approach suggests that Moses must be empathetic to be a moral adversary. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. While the text does not specify how God attempts to kill His victim (Ibn Ezra on *Shemot* 4:24 suggests that the victim becomes mortally ill), in one vivid *midrash* (*Midrash Aggada* Buber *Shemot* 4:24), God sends a snake that swallows Moses’ body until the point of his circumcision, thereby indicating to Tzippora what she must do to fix the situation. The snake in this *midrash* connects the incident to the first sign God gives Moses, in 4:2-4. In our examination of those verses (in *shiur* #14), I suggested that the snake symbolizes Egypt (see *Yirmiyahu* 46:22). The *midrash* may be suggesting that this event prepares Moses for his descent to Egypt, where his life is in danger. Yet, by clinging to God’s covenant (represented by circumcision), Moses can deflect the danger. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See *Nedarim* 32a. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael Yitro*, *Masekhta* *De-Amalek* 1; Targum Pseudo-Jonathan *Shemot* 4:24. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* 28 draws a correlation between circumcision and the willingness to accept the extra responsibility of the firstborn to serve God: “Esau spurned circumcision just as he spurned the birthright (*bekhora*).” Esau's rejection of the birthright reflects his unwillingness to consecrate himself to God, which is the same reason he rejects circumcision. According to *Shemot* 22:29, firstborn animals remain with their mothers for seven days, and are consecrated to God only on the eighth day. This suggests a parallel to circumcision, through which the body of every male child is symbolically consecrated to God on the eighth day. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This is in contrast to Joseph, who references God in explaining both of his sons’ names (*Bereishit* 41:51-52). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See *Shemot* 18:3-4. R’ Yitzchak Karo (*Toledot* *Yitzchak, Shemot* 18:3) observes these textual nuances, explaining – similar to the above *midrash*, but without referencing it – that Tzippora’s family retained authority over the first son, naming him and assuming responsibility for his cultural and religious training, while Moses did the same with their second son. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. While some (e.g. Cassuto, *Exodus*, pp. 60-61) have assumed that Tzippora is speaking to Moses, calling him her *chatan* *damim* (bridegroom of blood), Greenberg (*Understanding Exodus*, p. 114) points out that the word *chatan* is never used in the Bible to mean “husband” in reference to a wife; it is used only in relation to one’s in-laws. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See, e.g., *Shemot* *Rabba* 5:8; Ibn Ezra on *Shemot* 4:24. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Possibly, Moses is not so much slothful as he is interested in concealing identity, or perhaps leaving the child’s identity open. Moses seems adept at the art of concealment; having been concealed by his mother at birth, he later hides the body of the Egyptian that he killed. He also refrains from identifying himself to Re’uel’s daughters, who assume that he is “an Egyptian man” (2:17-19). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. A ubiquitous midrashic tradition posits that Moses was born circumcised (*Sota* 12a; Shemot Rabba 1:24; *Midrash Tehillim* 9:8 lists Moses among 13 men who were born circumcised, while *Tanchuma Noach* 9:3 lists him among seven; see also *Avot De-Rabbi Natan* 2:5). In one respect, this appears to be a positive portrayal of a child born to be unique, already consecrated to God. However, this *midrash* leaves no freedom of choice for Moses or his parents; whether they like it or not, Moses is born a member of the covenant. In this midrashic portrayal, Moses’ struggle with his identity seems pointless: Moses’ identity is predetermined; he must yield.to his destiny. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Rashbam compares our episode with that of Jacob, who wrestles with a man\angel while he is on a journey and becomes lame (compare the word *naga* in *Bereishit* 32:25, 32 to *Shemot* 4:25). A third incident in which a divine being injures the leg of a man on a journey occurs in connection to Balaam. See Rashbam on *Bereishit* 32:29. Rashbam maintains that all three incidents portray men whose journey goes against God’s will. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This discussion is found in *Nedarim* 31b-32a, where the opinion of R. Yosi is attributed to Rebbi. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. R. Yosi himself explains that this is because Moses occupied himself with his lodgings first. This explanation is unclear and has generated many subsequent explanations by different commentaries. I have, therefore, brought a different possible explanation for Moses’ punishment. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See Rabbeinu Bechaye on *Shemot* 12:13, where he asserts that the point of the Paschal sacrifice is that it involved great danger (because of the midrashic tradition that the Egyptians regarded lambs as deities – e.g., *Shemot Rabba* 16:2). Therefore, anyone who sacrificed a Paschal lamb displayed his piety and faith in God. This is why the blood of that sacrifice protected Israel from the plague of the firstborn. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)