YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat shemot**

### Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan

**Moshe’s Appointment as God’s Messenger**

Translated by David Strauss

I.

And He said: I am the God of your father, the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzchak, and the God of Yaakov. And Moshe hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God. And the Lord said: I have surely seen the affliction of My people that are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their pains; and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey; to the place of the Canaanite, and the Hittite, and the Amorite, and the Perizzite, and the Hivite, and the Jebusite. And now, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come to Me; moreover I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come now therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh, and you will bring My people the children of Israel out of Egypt. And Moshe said to God: Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt? And He said: For I will be with you; and this shall be the sign to you, that I have sent you: when you bring the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain. (*Shemot* 3:6-12)

In a single moment, Moshe is transformed from a sensitive, unusually gifted, and courageous Egyptian-Midyanite shepherd, though with a blurred Jewish consciousness and the negative baggage that comes with it, into the potential leader of God's people – the one who will repeatedly risk his life for their survival and the preservation of their Torah, and who will give up all his personal possessions and even his family for the sake of his great mission. The key word for the upheaval that took place in Moshe's heart is *anokhi*, "I am," which begins Moshe's first encounter with the word of God. The entire people of Israel will later hear the same word in the very same place, and discover new life within themselves by way of its power. But there, the upheaval will be far more complex and complicated.

The plain sense of the verses suggests that Moshe was assigned two tasks: to go to Pharaoh and to take Israel out of Egypt. In the course of God's conversation with Moshe, it will become clear that “going to Pharaoh” will include smiting him with all the plagues to be inflicted on Egypt:

And I know that the king of Egypt will not give you leave to go, except by a mighty hand. And I will put forth My hand and smite Egypt with all My wonders which I will do in its midst. And after that, he will send you. (*Shemot* 3:19-20)

Moshe tries not to accept either mission. He asks: "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh," and then again: "[Who am I,] that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" He sees himself as unfit for both tasks. Perhaps he sees himself that way because of the two failures that he suffered on the first two days he encountered his people:

And it came to pass in those days, Moshe grew up, and he went out to his brothers and saw their burdens; and he saw an Egyptian man smiting a Hebrew man of his brethren. And he looked this way and that way, and he saw that there was no man, and he smote the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.

And he went out on the second day, and, behold, two men of the Hebrews were striving together; and he said to the wicked one: Why do you smite your fellow? And he said: Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Do you think to kill me, as you killed the Egyptian? And Moshe feared, and said: Surely the thing is known (*Shemot* 2:11-14)

On the first day, Moshe slew the Egyptian. He tried to do so in secret, but he was seen and was liable to the death penalty, and so he fled. He therefore saw himself as the person who was the least qualified to approach Pharaoh. Moshe was probably still unaware that the Pharaoh who had wanted to kill him was dead, and even if he knew this, it was possible that the pursuit of Moshe set in motion by that Pharaoh was still in place. On the second day, Moshe reproached a Hebrew man who had struck his fellow, and he failed there as well. He now sees himself as one who cannot possibly lead the people and bring them out of Egypt.

But God insists that it is precisely Moshe who will go as His messenger to redeem the people of Israel. It would seem that unlike Moshe, God sees the two days Moshe was tested in Egypt as successes, not failures. Moshe was the only Hebrew who dared to challenge the tyranny of the Egyptian taskmaster, and to teach his fellow taskmasters that the humiliation and suffering of the Hebrews could not be ignored. The Egyptians no doubt retaliated with vengeance, but it is safe to assume that from that day on, they were more careful in their treatment of their Hebrew underlings. Moshe fled, but his action bore fruit. No doubt many of the Israelites stood up more erectly after Moshe's action. The faint and distant footsteps of redemption began to be heard.

The Hebrew who struck his fellow did not heed Moshe. He was probably not the only one who was angry with Moshe for inciting the Egyptian regime against the Hebrew slaves. But there were doubtless many who were moved by Moshe's rebuke. They internalized his message that redemption must begin with the tightening of their ranks within, with helping one another and not fighting one another for survival. Moshe did not know this, but he succeeded. God chose him specifically to take the Israelites out of Egypt and bring them to Mount Sinai “as one man with a single heart.”

II.

The Torah will tell us in the book of *Bamidbar* that God decreed at the time of Moshe’s sin at Mei Meriva that he would not bring the people of Israel into the land; the commentators understand that this decree was issued in the fortieth year of Israel's sojourn in the wilderness. The verses in the *Mishneh Torah*, i.e., the book of *Devarim,* seem to indicate that Moshe did not enter the land because of the sin of the spies, in the second year from Israel's leaving Egypt, and this indeed is Rabbi Yitzchak Abravanel’s view. But *Chazal* turned over every stone in our *parasha* to prove that already at the time of the burning bush, or shortly before or shortly after, it was clear that Moshe would not bring the people of Israel into their ancestral land. The Midrash lays blame on Moshe for not protesting when the daughters of Yitro presented him to their father as an Egyptian, and *Chazal* also comment on Moshe's skepticism that the people of Israel will be able to believe in him:

And Moshe answered and said: But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken to my voice; for they will say: The Lord has not appeared to you. (*Shemot* 4:1)

[God] said to him: They are believers, [and] the descendants of believers, whereas you will ultimately disbelieve. They are believers, as it is written: "And the people believed" (*Shemot* 4:31); the descendants of believers: "And he [Avraham] believed in the Lord" (*Bereishit* 15:6). You will ultimately disbelieve, as it is stated: "[And the Lord said to Moshe and Aharon:] Because you did not believe in me" (*Bamidbar* 20:12). (*Shabbat* 97a)

Similarly, in reference to the punishment for Moshe's plea: "Send, I pray you, by the hand of the one You will send" (*Shemot* 4:13), *Chazal* tell us:

Thus did the Holy One, blessed be He, detain Moshe for six days, and on the seventh day he [Moshe] said to him: "Send, I pray you, by the hand of the one You will send." The Holy One, blessed be He, swore to him that he would not enter the Land of Israel, as it is stated: "Therefore, you shall not bring this congregation into the land"… The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: You said: "Send, I pray you, by the hand of the one You will send"; behold, Yehoshua, your disciple, your attendant, who was reared by you, will bring Israel into the land; you will not go in with them. (*Mekhilta de-Rashbi* 3)

And in Rashi:

Another explanation is: By the hand of some other person whom You will be pleased to send – for in the end, I shall not bring them into the land nor shall I become their deliverer in the future – and You have many messengers! (Rashi, *Shemot* 4:13)

And again, regarding the end of our *parasha*:

"Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh" (*Shemot* 6:3) – you shall behold the war against Pharaoh, but not the war against the thirty-one kings. (*Sanhedrin* 111a)

*Chazal's* approach is well reflected in the passage dealing with the burning bush, and in other places as well. Let us reconsider, for instance, the verses cited above:

And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey; to the place of the Canaanite, and the Chitite, and the Amorite, and the Perizite, and the Chivite, and the Yevusite… Come now therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh, and you will bring My people the children of Israel out of Egypt.

These verses may be construed as conveying a kind of "division of labor" between God and Moshe: Moshe was sent to deliver Israel from Egypt, whereas God came down not only to deliver Israel from Egypt, but to bring them to the land of milk and honey, to the land of Canaan. Moshe was not sent on this mission.

And later:

Go and gather the elders of Israel together, and say to them: The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Avraham, of Yitzchak, and of Yaakov, has appeared to me, saying: I have surely remembered you, and seen that which is done to you in Egypt. And I have said: I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanite, and the Chitite, and the Amorite, and the Perizite, and the Chivite, and the Yevusite, to a land flowing with milk and honey. And they shall hearken to your voice. And you shall come, you and the elders of Israel, to the king of Egypt, and you shall say to him: The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us. And now let us go, we pray you, three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God. (*Shemot* 3:16-18)

My view is that the story told to Pharaoh of a three-day journey was not a lie designed to escape from Egypt, but the absolute truth (I discuss this at length in my book *Ki Karov Eilekha*). For our purposes, God's message to the elders of Israel is that He will bring them up to the land of the Canaanites – but their mission under Moshe's leadership was only to go out for the purpose of worshipping God on Mount Sinai. From here, too, it may be inferred that even at that early stage, it was not Moshe who was to bring them into the land.

III.

Let us reconsider the first conversation between God and Moshe that was quoted above. The cry of the Israelites is emphasized twice in these verses: first as the cause of God's descent to save Israel and bring them to the land that God had sworn to their forefathers, and then as a reason for judging Egypt for "the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them." The cry comes to God just as the cry of a young woman[[1]](#footnote-1) came to Him from Sodom:

And now, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come to Me. (*Shemot* 3:9)

I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to her cry, which is come to Me; and if not, I will know. (*Bereishit* 18:21)

Thus, the second mention of the cry appears as the reason for sending Moshe to Pharaoh and smiting him. In this context, the ascent to the land of Canaan is not mentioned, but only bringing Israel out of Egypt. Israel's exodus from Egypt comes together with the destruction of Egypt by way of the plagues, as punishment for the harsh servitude.

The urgency is emphasized with the word “now”:

And **now**, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come to Me… Come **now** therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh.

IV.

Let us continue with Moshe's words to God:

And Moshe said to God: Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt? And He said: For I will be with you; and this shall be the sign to you, that I have sent you: when you bring the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain. (*Shemot* 3:11-12)

The commentators struggled to identify the answers to Moshe's two questions, regarding his inability to stand before Pharaoh and his inability to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. They also asked: What is the sign that God gives him in this verse?

Rashi went in a midrashic direction that I find difficult to reconcile with the plain sense of the verses.[[2]](#footnote-2) The Ramban explained that God would be with Moshe when he stands before Pharaoh, and that the Israelites' standing at Mount Sinai after coming out of Egypt was the sign that God gave Moshe. This sign would bring the Israelites to believe in Moshe when he leads them on the difficult path to Canaan, as it is stated: "And they will also believe in you forever" (*Shemot* 19:9). This is the answer to Moshe's second question – how he will take Israel out of Egypt and how they will follow him.

Alongside the words of the commentators, I wish to offer my own suggestions regarding these questions. To the two questions posed by Moshe – how will he stand before Pharaoh, and how will he lead the people of Israel – God gives one answer:

And he said: I will be with you.

The backing that God promises to Moshe answers any doubt that might arise as to the success of the mission. In addition, God gives Moshe a sign that it is He who sent him, and that this is no delusion or hallucination:

And this shall be the sign to you, that I have sent you…

In my opinion, the verse refers to the sign of the burning bush that was not consumed, as understood by Rashi. I shall attempt to prove this with the help of *Chazal*’s comparison between three of the major judges in the book of *Shoftim* and three of Israel's greatest leaders – Moshe, Aharon, and Shmuel:

Gidon in his generation – as Moshe in his generation; Bedan (= Shimshon) in his generation – as Aharon in his generation; Yiftach in his generation – as Shmuel in his generation. (*Rosh Ha-shana* 25b)

We shall here address only the comparison between Gidon and Moshe:

a. Gidon mentions the exodus from Egypt several times as an example of the redemption that God can bring about for Israel in every generation:

Thus says the Lord… I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you forth out of the house of bondage; and I delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians, and out of the hand of all who oppressed you…

And Gidon said to him: Oh, my lord, if the Lord be with us, why then is all this befallen us? and where are all His wondrous works which our fathers told us of, saying: Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt? (*Shoftim* 6:8-13)

b. The *navi* states regarding Gidon: "And the angel of the Lord appeared to him" (*Shoftim* 6:12), in similar manner to the revelation to Moshe at the burning bush: "And the angel of the Lord appeared to him" (*Shemot* 3:2).

c. In 6:13 (and again in verse 15), Gidon says to God: "Oh, my Lord," using a formulation that is similar to Moshe's appeal to God (*Shemot* 4:13).

d. When Gidon argues, as did Moshe, that he is not the man for the job, God replies: "And the Lord said to him: I will be with you" (*Shoftim* 6:16), just as He answered Moshe regarding a similar question (*Shemot* 3:12).

e. Gidon asks God for many signs, and God accedes to his request. Likewise, God gave Moshe signs concerning his mission.

We will discuss one sign that Gidon requested:

And he said to him: If now I have found favor in your sight, then show me a sign that it is you that talks with me…Then the angel of the Lord put forth the end of the staff that was in his hand, and touched the meat and the *matzot*; and there went up fire out of the rock, and consumed the meat and the *matzot*; and the angel of the Lord departed out of his sight. (*Shoftim* 6:17-21)

The sign that it was indeed God or His angel who was speaking to Gidon, and that He would be with him, is the fire that consumes the sacrifice. It would seem, then, that the sign about this that God sends Moshe is also fire – the fire that does not consume the bush.

We have explained God's utterance "I will be with you" as support and assistance for all aspects of the mission, and we have identified the sign as the burning bush. What is left to explain is the meaning of the statement: "When you bring the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain" (*Shemot* 3:12). Let us reexamine this verse in its context:

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| Come now therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh, that you may bring My people the children of Israel out of Egypt.  |  |
|  | And Moshe said to God: Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt? And He said: I will be with you; and this shall be the sign to you, that I have sent you: |
| when you bring the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain. |  |

The left-hand column defines Moshe's mission: to go to Pharaoh, and to bring the children of Israel out of Egypt to serve the Lord on this mountain. The right-hand column is Moshe's outburst: in the middle of God's address to him, Moshe breaks out with the claim that he is not the man for the job and God answers him. God then continues with His original address to Moshe regarding his mission.

It seems that we have before us yet another indication that Moshe's mission was to end with bringing the people of Israel to Mount Sinai and giving them God's Torah. It did not include bringing them into the land of Canaan.

As stated, *Chazal* also argued that already at the burning bush, it is apparent that Moshe was not destined to bring the Jewish people into the land. This plan was altered, in my opinion, following the sin of the golden calf; at that point, God decreed that Moshe would indeed bring the children of Israel into the land. The plan was altered again, however, following the sin of the waters of Meriva or perhaps even earlier, already at the time of the sin of the spies. With God's help, I intend to discuss this at length when we get to the sin of the golden calf, and again in the book of *Bamidbar.*

(Edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. Editor’s note: see *Bereishit Rabba* 49:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The reader is encouraged to explore the words of Rashi as well as the resolution posed by the Rashbam. This, however, is not the forum in which to expand on their comments. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)