

BS”D Parashat Shemot 5783

From Moses to Moshe Rabbeinu

A basic premise in the God-Man relationship is the Creator’s choice to endow Man with the godly attribute – the freedom to choose. HaShem’s choices, among infinite others, is to make one new universe today or to make a trillion at one time, whereas Man’s choices range between doing good or doing evil, without the Creator forcing or coercing in either direction.

The God of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov sent his beloved Jews into slavery (for reasons which we are not aware of) and had already foreseen the stages of the future emancipation and the background of the personalities who would be empowered with its implementation.

The emancipator would have to possess three characteristics: 1- some affiliation with the Jewish people, which leaves out an Egyptian, 2- a person who would not be overwhelmed by the pomp and pretentiousness of the royal court, and 3- one who could castigate Paro without fear that it would cost him his life.

Enter the episode of the child Moshe. He was placed among the reeds of the river, found by princess Batya, returned to his mother Yocheved to be nursed and at two years old was returned to Batya to raise him as a prince in the palace “under the nose” of the ruthless Paro.

The next time we encounter Moshe he is eighty years old. From the Midrashim we learn that Moshe filled many important, responsible, royal positions in the Egyptian government, including many outside of the land of Egypt. It seems that

Moshe was aware of his Jewish background but was consciously an Egyptian.

The parasha relates that “one day” Moshe set out from the palace to see what was happening in those regions far removed from the capital. He saw an Egyptian taskmaster smiting a Hebrew slave. Moshe was seized with wrath and killed the Egyptian and escaped to the land of Midian.

Questions:

1. Why was Moshe shocked by the sight of an Egyptian smiting a Jew? Did he not know that millions of Jews were being beaten daily?
2. If Moshe believed that he behaved properly in killing the Egyptian, why did he not bring the matter before Paro, instead choosing to flee the country?
3. Was it just a “coincidence” that in Midian Moshe found himself in Yitro’s home, among the vast expanses of Midian?
4. In the miraculous episode of the burning bush that was not consumed, our sages say that for seven days and nights Moshe was commanded to return to Egypt to intervene in the violation of the Jews’ “human rights” and Moshe refused. Is that possible?
5. How did it happen that Moshe could come and go from Paro’s palace as he pleased? What is more, how could it be that Moshe severely rebuked Paro in an insulting manner, yet Paro did not lift a finger to punish him?
6. In Moshe’s first encounter with Paro on his return from Midian, he warned the King: “I have told you to let My son (Am Yisrael) go and serve Me. If you refuse to let him leave, I will [ultimately] kill your own first-born son” (Shemot 4:23). Yet isn’t it a fact that Paro had no first-born son!

I suggest:

Moshe's name from birth was Tuvia, but HaShem chose to call him by his Egyptian name Moshe, which means, "drawn out of the water", as a hint to Moshe that he had been born to remove the Israelites from Egypt, but not to bring the Jewish People into the Promised Land.

Moshe, as Paro's adopted son, was heavily ensconced in Egyptian culture. He had studied in excellent military and civilian academies and knew all the "right people" in Egypt.

We can assume that Amram and Yocheved, his biological halachic parents, had not been given visitation rights to teach Moshe the rudiments of Judaism as it had been received from Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov. Moshe was brought up as the beloved son of Batya, and many in Paro's court were probably aware of his Hebraic background.

Out of his love for him, Paro distanced Moshe from the harsh reality of the Egyptian regime, enslaving millions of Jews under heinous conditions. He had further appointed Moshe to run "his household" so Moshe would concentrate totally on the palace and royal court and not on what was happening outside. According to the Midrash, Moshe served in many positions even outside Egypt.

Between Shemot 2:10, in which Batya adopts Moshe as a son, and the very next verse, in which Moshe "is grown and begins to go out to his own people", spotting the Egyptian smiting the Israelite, are many years that the Torah conceals. So, we do not know what happened to Moshe during those formative years.

What emerges from the text is that Moshe had been unaware that the Jews were being cruelly enslaved, and that on a daily basis many were being beaten and killed. As noted, Paro had taken pains to distance him from the harsh reality that reigned in Egypt due to the decree of Paro himself.

Moshe's world was about to collapse. Not because he had killed an Egyptian but because of the sudden awareness that the man

who had been like a father to him, who had educated and provided him with all of the world's bounty, Paro, was in fact a cruel despot who was subjugating an entire nation; and what is more, it was the nation of Yosef, who had saved Egypt.

Moses understood that he must approach Paro and chastise him. Yet that was a mission impossible for two reasons: Moshe understood now that the Egyptian economy was based on slavery, and all of Egypt's military and political power derived from its strong economic situation.

Moreover, Moshe was incapable of castigating Paro because he loved Paro and Batya and identified himself as an Egyptian. Moshe was left with no choice but to flee Egypt to escape the reality in which he was indirectly a partner due to his associations with the monarchy.

Moshe fled to Midian and found himself in Yitro's house. Who was Yitro? The Talmud in Sotah relates that Paro had three advisors who were privy to the plan to enslave the Jewish People: Yitro, Bilam and Iyov. When Paro presented his plan, Bilam agreed immediately, Iyov remained silent, and Yitro fled to Midian.

Here "hashgacha pratit" (Divine Providence) directed Moshe, the escapee, to the home of Yitro, the escapee. Yitro knew Moshe from Paro's palace, and Moshe knew Yitro, as well. In the cold nights of Midian, as Moshe and Yitro sat around the warm hearth, Yitro thought to himself that the only person who could influence Paro was his adopted son Moshe, the man sitting across from him, yet Moshe had fled from his moral responsibility. Moshe thought to himself that the policy of slavery was largely facilitated by Yitro's not having opposed it, instead preferring flight. Moshe and Yitro were two men who had fled from their moral responsibilities, expected of anyone with a spark of integrity and fairness.

One day, Moshe was herding Yitro's flocks on Mount Chorev,

i.e., Mount Sinai. Suddenly he noticed a wondrous sight – a burning bush that was not being consumed. When Moshe drew near to the strange sight, he heard a voice telling him to return to Egypt, to approach Paro, to identify himself as a member of the Jewish People and to demand that Paro release the Jewish people. For seven days and nights he stood firm in his refusal, arguing by various means that he was not the right man for the mission.

And how indeed was it possible to refuse HaShem for even a moment, let alone seven days and nights?

As a rule, HaShem does not force spirituality on a person. Everyone is given free will to choose between good and evil. What happened there on the mountain did not involve HaShem's immediately commanding Moshe to undertake the mission, but rather His arousing Moshe's pure conscience. For an entire week, Moshe's conscience weighed upon him to do the right thing, to approach Paro and demand freedom for the Jewish People.

Moshe struggled to block out the truth within his conscience, but ultimately gave in and decided that he must return to Egypt. Once he made that decision, HaShem revealed Himself and appointed Moshe as His emissary until the day of his death on Mount Avarim.

Moshe returned to Egypt, to the palace of his childhood, to his "mother" Batya and to his "grandfather" Paro whom he so much loved.

One can only imagine what occurred when Moshe entered the royal palace after being away for decades. Paro hurriedly summoned Batya. Moshe approached them, and Batya ran to hug and kiss him, tearfully exclaiming, "Moshe, my son! Moshe, my son! Where have you been?" Yet Moshe did not respond. Then Paro alighted from his high throne and with a penetrating gaze said, in a tone of anger and pain: "Where were you? Not a

letter! Not a single message! Look at your mother Batya who raised you since you were an infant. Her eyes are red from crying over you!”

Paro waited for an answer that did not come. So, he said to Moshe, “What do you have to say, Moshe?” Moshe looked at Paro and at Batya, and with tears in his eyes, declared, “Let my people go!”

Paro was shocked by what he heard. “Let my people go?” What are you talking about? We are your people!”

Moshe gazed directly at Paro, raised his voice and proclaimed, “The Hebrew slaves are my people! If you do not free them, the God of the Hebrews will kill your first-born son!” But Paro had no sons. In fact, Moshe was announcing that if Paro did not free the Israelites, he would no longer be able to view Moshe as part of the royal family. Paro could not bear the threat that Moshe would be cut off from him, but to the same extent he could not sabotage the economic infrastructure of his kingdom – his Hebrew slaves.

In order to remove the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, Moshe would need to trample Paro’s glory and humiliate him in the extreme. But how could Moshe trample the man who had given him his life as a gift, and had raised him and educated him as a son?

HaShem would have to change the way Moshe related to Paro. Moshe’s attitude would have to sink from the heights of love to the depths of hatred. Paro’s reaction to Moshe’s request to allow the Israelites a number of days of rest, “in order to serve HaShem” (Shemot 5:1), was to increase the suffering:

“You are indolent!” retorted Paro. “Lazy! That’s why you are saying that you want to sacrifice to HaShem. Now go! Get to work! You will not be given any straw, but you must deliver your quota of bricks.” (Shemot 5:17-18)

Moshe understood just how evil Paro had become: “All your officials here will come and bow down to me. They will say, ‘Leave! You and all your followers!’ Only then will I leave.’ He left Paro in great anger” (11:8).

Now Moshe was ready to unleash the plagues upon Paro and upon Egypt. It was the great love between Paro and Moshe, that prevented Paro from killing Moshe.

HaShem had planned everything in advance. The redeemer would have to be a man who was part of the royal court. Who had been involved in all the workings of Egyptian statecraft and had a loving relationship with Paro. Only such a man could survive the overbearing ambience of the majestic palace, and utter harsh words of condemnation to Paro and emerge unscathed.

The emotional attachment between Paro and Moshe ended in a surprising manner. Our sages say that the entire Egyptian army drowned in the Sea of Reeds except for one man who was spared – Paro. HaShem saved Paro out of an understanding of the great emotional connection that existed between the two men. Moshe and the man who had saved him, raised him, nurtured and loved him, the despotic Paro.

Questions:

What if Moshe had not veered off the track in order to view the incredible sight of a burning bush which is not consumed? Or if Moshe would not have yielded to the call of his conscience to return to Egypt and challenge Paro face to face? Would we still be slaves in Egypt to this day, as indicated in the Haggadah?

Where would we be today if Binyamin Ze’ev Herzl would have retreated before the calls of his distractors to leave his dream of establishing a Jewish medina in Eretz Yisrael? Or if the halutzim (pioneers) would not have fought malaria, malnutrition and Arab attacks and remained in Europe? Or if we had not made a preemptive air attack in 1967?

And many more disturbing hypothetical questions.

However, Moshe did make the right choices and many good Jews sacrificed their lives to create an independent Medina in our ancient holy land for the exiled Jewish nation.

Now, dear reader, let's ponder what are the life-changing choices that we have taken, or not taken, for the welfare of Am Yisrael in the years that HaShem has allotted us?

Shabbat Shalom

Nachman Kahana

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