

Shemot 5779

BS"D Parashat Shemot 5779

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From Moses to Moshe Rabbeinu

At age eighty, after many years of filling important, responsible, royal positions in the Egyptian government, 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.

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 Pharaoh, instead choosing to flee the country?

Was it just a “coincidence” that Moshe found himself in Yitro’s home?

In the miraculous episode of the burning bush that is not consumed, our sages say that for seven days and seven nights HaShem commanded Moshe to return to Egypt and Moshe refused. Is that possible?

How did it happen that Moshe could come and go from Pharaoh’s palace as he pleased? What is more, how could it be that Moshe severely rebuked Pharaoh in an insulting manner, yet Pharaoh did not lift a finger to punish him?

In Moshe’s first encounter with Pharaoh on his return from Midian, he warned Pharaoh: “I have told you to let My son 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 Pharaoh had no first-born son, but only a daughter, Bitya?

I suggest:

Moshe's name from birth was Tuvia, but HaShem chose to call him 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 enter or bring the Jewish People into the Promised Land.

Moshe, as Pharaoh'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 had not been given visitation rights to teach Moshe HaShem's Torah as it had been received from Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov. Moshe was brought up as the beloved son of Bitya, and many in Pharaoh's court were probably aware of his Hebraic background.

Out of his love for Moshe, Pharaoh had distanced him 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 Bitya 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 eighty years that the Torah conceals. We do not know what happened to Moshe during those formative years.

The Jew's beating led Moshe's mood to swing between anger and disappointment, between frustration and embarrassment. 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, Pharaoh had taken pains to distance him from the harsh reality that reigned in Egypt due to the decree of Pharaoh, 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 him and provided him with all of the world's bounty, Pharaoh, was a cruel despot who was subjugating an entire nation, and what is more, it was the nation of Yosef, who had saved Egypt.

Moshe understood that he must approach Pharaoh and chastise him. Yet that was a mission impossible for two reasons: Moshe understood now that Egypt's 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 Pharaoh over the fact that Jewish blood was being shed because of Pharaoh. Moshe loved Pharaoh and Bitya and he 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 Pharaoh had three advisers who were privy to the plan to enslave the Jewish People: Yitro, Bilam and Iyov. When Pharaoh presented his plan, Bilam agreed immediately. Iyov remained silent and Yitro fled to Midian.

Here Divine Providence directed Moshe, the escapee, to the home of Yitro, the escapee. Yitro knew Moshe from Pharaoh'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 Pharaoh 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 both fled from the moral responsibility 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 Pharaoh, to identify himself as a member of the Jewish People and to demand that Pharaoh let the Jews go. For seven days and seven nights he stood firm in his refusal, arguing by various means that he was not the right man for that mission.

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

As a rule, spirituality cannot be forced 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, the thing that had to be done, to approach Pharaoh and to demand that he free the Jewish People. Moshe tried to block out the truth within his conscience, but he ultimately gave in and decided that he must return to Egypt. Once he made that decision, HaShem revealed Himself to Moshe and made Moshe His emissary until the day of his death on Mount Avarim.

Moshe returned to Egypt, to the palace of his childhood, to his "mother" Bitya and to his "grandfather" Pharaoh whom he so loved.

One can imagine what occurred when Moshe entered the royal

palace after being away for dozens of years. When Pharaoh was informed that Moshe was there, Pharaoh hurriedly summoned Bitya. Moshe approached them, and Bitya ran to hug and kiss him, tearfully exclaiming, "Moshe, my son! Moshe, my son! Where have you been?" Yet Moshe did not respond. Then Pharaoh alighted from his high throne and with a penetrating gaze said to Moshe, in a tone combining anger and pain: "Where were you? Not a letter! Not a single message! Look at your mother Bitya who raised you since you were an infant. Her eyes are red from crying over you!"

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

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

Moshe gazed directly at Pharaoh, raised his voice and proclaimed, "The Hebrew slaves are my people! If you do not free them, the HaShem of the Hebrews will kill your first-born son!" But Pharaoh had no sons. In actual fact, Moshe was announcing that if Pharaoh did not free the Israelites, he would no longer be able to view Moshe as part of the royal family. Pharaoh 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 Pharaoh's glory and humiliate him in the extreme. But how would Moshe be able to 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 Pharaoh. Moshe's attitude would have to sink from the heights of love

to the depths of hatred. Pharaoh'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 make the decree even worse for them:

"You are indolent!" retorted Pharaoh. "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 Pharaoh 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 Pharaoh in great anger" (11:8).

Now Moshe was ready to unleash the plagues upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt.

There was great love between Pharaoh and Moshe, which prevented Pharaoh from killing Moshe, even though the latter was there to turn everything upside down in Egypt. HaShem had planned everything. The redeemer had to be a man who had been part of Pharaoh's royal courtyard, had been involved in all the workings of Egyptian statecraft, and who had a loving relationship with Pharaoh. Only such a man could survive the menace of entering the palace, uttering harsh words to Pharaoh, and emerge unscathed.

The emotional attachment between Pharaoh 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 – Pharaoh. HaShem saved Pharaoh out of an understanding of the great emotional connection that existed between Moshe and the man who had saved him, raised him, nurtured and loved him – the Despot Pharaoh.

Shabbat Shalom,

Nachman Kahana

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