

Shemot-Va'eira 5780

BS"D Parashat Shemot-Va'eira 5780

Rabbi Nachman Kahana

A Time When Anger is Appropriate

We read in parashat Shemot of the Egyptian prince Moshe, who after killing an Egyptian for flogging a Jewish slave was secure in his belief that no one had witnessed the incident. However, the following day when Moshe intervened between two embattled Jews – Datan and Aviram, it became apparent that these two had indeed seen what Moshe had done. Moshe escaped to Midyan rather than having to face his adopted father, Paro. As it would happen the two bad Jews were wealthy and influential even among the Egyptians and were Moshe's nemesis until they were swallowed up in the ground together with Korach.

In parashat Shemot, at the amazing scene of the burning bush Moshe is informed by HaShem (Shemot 14,19):

...return to Egypt for all those who seek your death have passed on

Rashi explains that HaShem was referring to the same Datan and

Aviram who were very much alive at the time, but in the interim they lost all their wealth and were now persona non grata in Paro's palace, hence no longer a threat to Moshe.

One of the means by which HaShem weakens our enemies as a first stage in their total destruction is to impoverish them financially, with subsequent loss of prestige and influence, and then they die.

Fast forward to our times. Not very long ago our holy land of Eretz Yisrael was surrounded and threatened by Arab countries of financial wealth. Today they are shadows of what they once were. Lebanon, once the Switzerland of the Middle East is being torn apart by sectarian violence and strife, including the very presence of the Shiite Hezbollah military group. Jordan could not stand on its own for a day if not for Israeli support. Syria is being torn apart by civil war and is no longer a military threat to us. Egypt cannot feed and house their rapidly growing population of an additional one million mouths to feed every 8 months. Now Egypt is importing natural gas from Israel. Iraq is divided between Sunni and Shiite communities. The Turks have their hands full with an ailing economy and an ongoing military conflict with the Kurds. One day, not far off, these enemies of Am Yisrael will be footnotes in a Jewish history book.

"There is nothing new under the sun".

From my book "With All Your Might"

THE GREATEST HUMAN DRAMA

At the heart of our parasha is one of the most emotionally charged human dramas in history, before which the greatest plays of Shakespeare pale. It is the story of the child with

the Hebrew name Tuvia, who later became the Egyptian called Moshe.

But as is the way of the Torah, the words tell us little with much more alluded to between the verses.

The following are only a few of the mysteries hidden in the parasha.

The Torah relates that Moshe went out one day “to his brothers and he saw their suffering, and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew of his brothers.” Moshe is so reviled by the scene that he kills the Egyptian.

1). Why was Moshe so shocked at the beating of a Jewish slave? Did he not know that millions of Jews were being beaten daily?

2). If indeed the conduct of the Egyptian taskmaster justified his being punished, why did Moshe not bring the matter before his adopted father, the Pharaoh? Why did he prefer to run away?

3). Of all the people in the land of Midian, how is it that Moshe finds himself “by chance” in the house of Yitro?

4). At the scene of the mysterious burning bush, for a period of seven days, Moshe rejects Hashem’s command that he return to Egypt. How does one argue with the Creator for even an instant, much less a whole week?

5). How does Moshe enter the palace— and attain an audience with Pharaoh— seemingly at will? And when he orders Pharaoh to free millions of slaves, in effect suggesting the undermining of the Egyptian economy, why does Pharaoh tolerate Moshe at all? Why does he not give the order to rid himself of this man?

6). At the first meeting with Pharaoh, which transpired before the first plague – a full year before the death of the firstborn Egyptians – Moshe already warns Pharaoh that his own

bechor (firstborn) will “die.” But Pharaoh had no bechor; his only child was his daughter Batya (or Bitya)!

I suggest the following with caution and apologies if I am wrong.

We meet Moshe for the first time as an infant. Chazal say that his real name – the one given to him by his parents – was Tuvia. The next time he appears in the Torah, he is an adult with the Egyptian name Moshe.

Being the adopted son of Batya and a member of the royal family, Moshe was certainly well versed in all aspects of the Egyptian culture. He undoubtedly completed the officer’s training course at “West Point,” and he was the honored guest at the cocktail parties given by the movers and shakers of Egyptian society.

Don’t fool yourself into believing that Amram and Yocheved had visitation rights with the young Moshe and that at these opportunities his true father taught him Yiddishkeit. Moshe was culturally an Egyptian. He was the beloved “son” of Pharaoh; and as the Midrash tells us, Pharaoh would often hold him on his lap. Pharaoh, his daughter, and many of the older courtiers (and probably Moshe himself), were aware of Moshe’s background – he was a Hebrew who was adopted by the childless Batya.

With this in mind, Pharaoh – who very much loved the clever and handsome Moshe – was anxious to eradicate every semblance of Moshe’s past from the boy’s consciousness, and certainly anxious to hide from him the intolerable servitude of the Hebrew people. The way to do this was to distance Moshe from life’s realities. Rashi comments that Pharaoh appointed Moshe al beito (“over his palace”), whereby Moshe would remain far from matters of the realm, having to concentrate on the complex affairs of the royal court.

The Torah relates that, one day, Moshe ventures out to see the

hinterland. He comes on a scene which was totally unexpected – the mass oppression of the Jewish people as the basis of the Egyptian economy. He is overwhelmed when he sees a taskmaster beating a Jewish slave. Moshe's sense of outrage arouses him to punish the oppressor.

Moshe is distraught, not because he killed the man, but because of the realization that Pharaoh – the man he has loved as a father – could be capable of this inhuman treatment to a people who had done only good for the Egyptian nation. It is like waking up one day to find out that your father was the commandant of the Auschwitz extermination camp.

Moshe could confront Pharaoh, but to do so would be to accuse his beloved “father” – the one who had saved Moshe from certain death and provided him with a princely life – of heinous crimes. Moshe's only way out was to run away, because to fulfill his moral obligation of standing up to Pharaoh and the entire Egyptian leadership was too awesome a task.

Moshe arrives at the home of Yitro. Who was Yitro? The Talmud (Tractate Sota) tells us that Pharaoh's three advisors were Yitro, Bilaam and Ei'yov. When Pharaoh brought up the matter of enslaving the Jews, Bilaam agreed, Ei'yov gave no opinion and Yitro RAN AWAY.

HaShem plans it that Moshe, the RUNAWAY from his responsibilities, finds himself in the home of the original runaway, Yitro. During the cold winter nights of Midian, while sitting around the fire, Moshe looks at Yitro and thinks to himself that if Yitro had not escaped his moral responsibilities and had rejected outright the proposal to enslave the Jews, there would have been no slavery. Having known Moshe as a child, Yitro knows that Moshe is the only person in the kingdom who can influence Pharaoh. However, Moshe has run away!

One day, while tending the sheep at Mount Chorev, Moshe sees a

wondrous sight – a burning bush which is not consumed. He draws closer and hears a voice. But it is not the voice of HaShem. It is the influence of this holy place which arouses Moshe's conscience. For seven days, Moshe's conscience paralyzes him at that spot. Should he return and confront Pharaoh with the fact that he is a despot, or should he let time run its course? At the end of seven days, Moshe resolves his conflict and decides to return and help his Jewish family. HaShem appears to Moshe at this point only after he decides to do the right thing.

Moshe returns to Egypt and to the palace; to the place of his childhood and to his beloved "mother" Batya, and to Pharaoh whom he dearly loves.

I picture the scene as follows: Moshe arrives at the palace gates, after being away (according to one opinion) for forty years. He asks the sentry to let him enter the palace to speak with Pharaoh. The sentry asks if he has an appointment. Moshe says he does not but asks the sentry to announce his presence. The sentry approaches Pharaoh's personal secretary and tells him that a certain "Moshe" wants to see Pharaoh. The secretary probably answers that without a previous appointment no one can see Pharaoh. The sentry tells the secretary that this strange-looking man insists on an audience. The secretary goes into the throne room and tells Pharaoh that a certain "Moshe" wishes to see him. Pharaoh jumps up and calls out to Batya to come immediately. Moshe is brought in. Pharaoh looks at him and asks, "Where have you been all this time? Not a letter. Not an e-mail. Look. Your mother Batya who saved your life, look at her eyes which have not stopped crying out of longing for you." Pharaoh continues, "What do you have to say for yourself?"

Moshe looks at Pharaoh and at his beloved Batya, and with tears in his eyes calls out to Pharaoh sh'lach et ami – "let my people go!" Pharaoh descends from his throne and says, "Moshe, WE are your people!" Moshe answers, "The Israelite

slaves are my people...and if you do not send out the Jews, then HaShem will kill your firstborn son." But Pharaoh has no son. In actuality, Moshe is saying that if Pharaoh does not free the Jews, then he will no longer feel like his son. Pharaoh cannot bear this threat from his beloved Moshe, but he also cannot free the slaves.

Pharaoh's love for Moshe most probably prevented him from killing the man who would overturn the entire national order. And it had to be a person like Moshe, who was intimately associated with Pharaoh and the royal court, who could come before the royal court and not be overwhelmed or intimidated by its grand ambience.

Moshe's love and respect for Pharaoh and Pharaoh's command never to see his face again precipitate a fierce emotional reaction (11,8).

The stirring scenes between Moshe and Pharaoh end in a very surprising way. Chazal say that the entire Egyptian army was destroyed at the crossing of Yam Suf except for Pharaoh himself. HaShem saves Pharaoh in deference to the mutual love between "father" and "son".

Moshe's mission now is to bring Pharaoh to his knees by agreeing to free the Jewish nation. But how can Moshe, who is eternally grateful to Pharaoh and Batya for everything they did for him, bring suffering to those he loves and respects so much?

HaShem has to cause a change of heart in Moshe regarding Pharaoh and all of the ministers and courtiers he knows so well. Moshe has to go from the heights of love to the depths of enmity and hostility. HaShem succeeds in bringing this about by sending Moshe to Pharaoh to plead for his people. But when Pharaoh refuses and indeed commands that the yoke of servitude be made heavier, Moshe sees the man for what he really is. Moshe is now ready to bring punishment upon

Pharaoh.

One of the many lessons that can be learned from the above scenario is the following.

Anger is a quality which Hashem created for man to use at appropriate times. When the great prophet Shmuel saw that King Shaul was not enraged by the evil ingrained in the heart of Agog, the Amalekite king, and was willing to spare his life, Shmuel himself took a sword and in rage killed Agog. Moshe also had to be taught to be angry at Pharaoh.

We get angry infrequently, even when it is justified. We get angry when we are personally insulted but keep our “cool” in the face of crimes against Yiddishkeit.

If there were enough real anger in the community at intermarriage or divorce, a Jew might think twice before taking the leap.

If we had been truly angry at the evil of Islam and the Arabs who wish to destroy Israel, we would have taken advantage of the great miracle of the Six Day War and rid ourselves of this curse.

If we would be angry enough at anti-Semitism and at the galut, we would have all come to Eretz Yisrael by now.

My fear is that HaShem will have to move, as he did with Moshe, in order to set our priorities straight. There is the galut, and there is the land which HaShem has chosen for the Jewish nation. How much better it would be to come home out of love rather than out of anger.

Shabbat Shalom,

Nachman Kahana

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